THREE

Getting to Know You

ARE YOU READING this book in a public place? If so, sneak a peek over the cover and take a look at a stranger. By definition you don’t know much about this person. But some people do. To someone he is a cherished father, a loving husband, a devoted friend. What does it mean to know someone? What does it take to go from being a stranger to becoming a friend?

My colleague Jack was once a stranger to me. Should you meet him, he would strike you as affable and thoughtful. And you’d probably find him generous too; when I was first introduced to him, he invited me to lunch to hear about my latest research projects. I soon discovered that he’s talkative and intelligent. After a few more lunches I learned a bit about his scholarly ambitions and how he felt about being a parent and a professor. However, as I continued to hang out with Jack, I began to notice that the stories all seemed familiar, even though they described different events. Then one day it struck me why this was so. Whether he was telling me about a presentation at an academic conference, a squabble with a neighbor, or how he fixed his car last week, the narrative was always a variation on the same story line: *Despite the odds against me and the expectations by others that I would fail, I persevered and succeeded and showed everyone else that I was right all along.* The recurring theme resonated with the way Jack saw the world around him and how he saw his place in that world. And this view of himself was an important part of his personality. After figuring out his theme, I felt I knew Jack better. I had gone to a deeper level.
Getting to know a person requires that we find ways to jump from one level to another, not just travel extensively at the same plane. The psychologist who knows the most about the different levels of personality is one of my academic heroes, Dan McAdams. He’s a brilliant and exceptionally creative professor at Northwestern University’s School of Education and Social Policy and the author of the influential book *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self.*

I was pleased to bump into McAdams at a recent conference because I had been hoping to ask him something. As soon as it seemed polite, I hit him with my question: “Does Lynn exist?” A knowing smile materialized on his face. Apparently he gets this question a lot because he immediately knew what I was talking about.

**PERSONALITY THE LONG WAY**

One of the things I have long admired about McAdams is his refusal to shy away from the kind of deep issues that make life complicated. McAdams loves to play in the sticky stuff. His forays off the beaten track have yielded some of the most interesting discoveries in contemporary personality research. His goal is to understand people, in all their richness, from a systematic scientific perspective. He studies personality “the long way,” meaning that he is interested in learning not only what people are like now but also how they became one way rather than another and, ultimately, how their past and present play into their future.

In a much admired article, McAdams explores a question at the very heart of what personality psychologists most care about: What does it really mean to know someone? He begins by inviting the reader to imagine him and his wife driving home from a dinner party. Before long, their conversation turns to the other guests. One of them, a widely traveled freelance writer, stood out from the others. At first she intimidated McAdams: “I felt I couldn’t keep up with the fast
tempo of her account, how she moved quickly from one exotic tale to another. Add to this the fact that she is a strikingly attractive woman, about forty years old, with jet black hair, dark eyes, seemingly flawless complexion, clothing both flamboyant and tasteful.” This was Lynn.

As the evening wore on, McAdams and his wife found themselves warming up to Lynn as she revealed more about her life and history, her values and feelings; they realized they both wanted to know Lynn better. This is the point at which McAdams poses his fundamental question. What would he need to know in order to know Lynn better?

This is a powerful question because although we can all bring to mind people we know well and people we know superficially, when we are forced to articulate what exactly distinguishes these two groups of people, the veil of simplicity falls away. Beyond miscellaneous facts (he has a large collection of butterflies) and historical details (she went to school in Guyana), it is hard to put your finger on what more you know about your inner circle of friends than about your acquaintances. What is it, in concrete terms, that we know after a thousand days of knowing someone that we did not know on day one?

McAdams provides a good answer to this question. Getting to know someone, he says, means progressing through three distinct levels of intimacy. When he first met Lynn, he thought about her in broad descriptors—she seemed socially dominant, extraverted, entertaining, dramatic, moody, slightly anxious, intelligent, and introspective. These descriptors are traits and they constitute the first level of knowing a person. The Big Five dimensions—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism—describe people at the level of traits.

Traits come first in McAdams’s scheme because they provide an efficient “first read” on someone. When describing ourselves and others, traits are the words we reach for first. They can often be found at the beginning of personal ads. “Kind, vivacious, tolerant, honest, and
spunky.” “I’m fun, smart, sexy, and open.” “I’m honest, crass, a little bit trashy, a lot naughty, and never, ever dull.”

Think about the words you might use to describe someone you have just met. There’s a good chance that your description will feature traits heavily—terms such as curious, friendly, extraverted, anxious, and moody arise easily in the language of personality. One study found that the most common words people used to describe themselves or others were friendly, lazy, helpful, easygoing, honest, happy, moody, selfish, and shy. Words at the bottom of the list—that is, rarely used words—included jittery, dramatic, reluctant, and two-faced. (And we’re not species-ist in our use of trait terms. In one of my studies of dog personality, some of the same traits came up, though of course there were important differences. The equivalent canine top ten descriptors are friendly, playful, loyal, cute, loud, loving, energetic, protective, affectionate, and smelly. Other rarer items in the dog domain included wrinkly, vivacious, tender, ragged, skittish, and obstinate.)

Trait terms are common in our language. One classic study set out to find out exactly how common. In 1936, the eminent Harvard personality psychologist Gordon Allport and his hapless assistant, Henry Odbert, published a monograph that has become famous not just for what the authors found but also for what they did. Allport and Odbert must have been short of entertainment because they set themselves a gargantuan task: to go through every entry in Webster’s unabridged dictionary and write down each instance of a word that could be used to describe someone’s personality. They found 17,953 such words—which ranged from common terms such as shy, friendly, calm, quiet, and wise, to obscure descriptors like dubitative, acaroid, bevering, and davered. However, many of these descriptors were not traits; they were evaluative terms, such as insignificant and worthy, or descriptors of temporary states of mind or mood, such as gibbering and rejoicing, or physical qualities that are sometimes associated with personality, like roly-poly and red-headed. So Allport and Odbert whittled away the terms they considered insufficiently observable or
trait-like and ended up with a mere 4,500 trait terms. This mammoth undertaking proved that we have an enormous vocabulary for describing consistent behaviors, and it also showed, by implication, that traits are a crucial piece of what people are like.

But, as McAdams notes, traits only take us a short distance toward the goal of knowing someone well. They take us only as far as acquaintanceship. For making weighty decisions, are traits enough? Would you be prepared to choose a spouse on the basis of a description of his or her traits? McAdams would bet not. With a hint of derision, he says that traits provide “a psychology of the stranger.” They paint a portrait in broad brushstrokes but leave out much of the finer detail. There are many ways to be extraverted or nervous or entertaining or dramatic or moody. What can traits tell us about Lynn’s values and political beliefs, or her goals and roles? We want to know more. What does she hope to achieve during the next five years? What are her regrets? What makes her weak in the knees? Answers to questions like these give us the kind of details we’d have to know to feel that Lynn is no longer a stranger. So to understand the unique way in which Lynn expresses her extraversion (and her other traits), we must step up a level in the McAdams hierarchy to level two: “personal concerns.”

Personal concerns provide the contextual details that are missing from traits. They include roles—Lynn is a wife, a mother, and a writer. They include goals—Lynn wants to read more contemporary fiction, win a writing award, make a greater effort to express what’s on her mind, and she wants to go to Venice. They include skills—Lynn can climb rocks; she tells good stories, and she writes well. They could include values, too, such as seeking a comfortable or an exciting life, a world at peace, a world of beauty, ambition, courage, family security, forgiveness, imagination, inner harmony, intellect, love, national security, salvation, self-respect, social recognition, true friendship, and wisdom.

These are the kinds of details snoopers dig for when they want to know someone better. Contrary to what you might expect, though,
getting to know someone won’t inevitably bring you closer to that person. Reading a biography of Winston Churchill might give you insights into his personality at all three of McAdams’s levels, but it won’t foster a relationship with the great leader. That said, learning about someone often does increase intimacy. That’s why research on relationships, romantic or otherwise, can help us understand the getting-to-know-you phenomenon.

Arthur Aron, a psychologist at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, is interested in how people form romantic relationships, and he’s come up with an ingenious way of taking men and women who have never met before and making them feel close to one another. Given that he has just an hour or so to create the intimacy levels that typically take weeks, months, or years to form, he accelerated the getting-to-know-you process through a set of thirty-six questions crafted to take the participants rapidly from level one in McAdams’s system to level two. The questions are part of an hour-long “sharing game” in which each member of a pair reads a question out loud and then they both answer it before moving on to the next question.

A sampling of questions from Aron’s “Sharing Game” appears below. Try answering them in your head and then consider what they reveal about you. You’ll see how sharing the answers could make you think you know someone and feel closer to that person, too.

- Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?
- Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? Why?
- What would constitute a “perfect” day for you?
- When did you last sing to yourself? To someone else?
- If you were able to live to the age of 90 and retain either the mind or body of a 30-year-old for the last 60 years of your life, which would you want?
- Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?
- If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?
• If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what would it be?
• Is there something that you’ve dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven’t you done it?
• What is your most treasured memory?
• If you knew that in one year you would die suddenly, would you change anything about the way you are living now? Why?
• What roles do love and affection play in your life?
• Share with the others an embarrassing moment in your life.
• When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?
• What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?

In just an hour, Aron’s subjects learned things about each other that would typically never emerge in a face-to-face meeting with a stranger. Some of these questions look at values and goals. Others are designed to break down the barriers we erect in ordinary formal or superficial relationships. For example, if we admit to others that we rehearse what we are going to say before making a phone call, we have essentially already let others peek behind our public mask; we are now free to talk about other stuff not typically authorized for broad consumption. These may seem like tough topics to share with a stranger, but Aron says he has encountered very few negative reactions from participants; virtually everyone enjoys the experience and finds it meaningful. The one exception was a study he did with police officers for whom the questions about death were too intense (so new questions were developed). Richard Slatcher, a relationships researcher at UCLA who has used the procedure, believes that people can deal comfortably with the personal questions because they slowly escalate their levels of disclosure, in essence giving people the opportunity to get used to the idea (albeit quickly) of sharing their deepest and sometimes darkest secrets.

How do we know it is really the content of the questions that’s driving the closeness, not just the camaraderie the subjects share
while chitchatting together? To tease this out, Aron also created a small-talk questionnaire that included questions such as these:

- When was the last time you walked for more than an hour? Describe where you went and what you saw.
- Describe the last time you went to the zoo.
- Tell the names and ages of your family members, include grandparents, aunts and uncles, and where they were born (to the extent you know this information).
- One of you say a word, the next say a word that starts with the last letter of the word just said. Do this until you have said fifty words. Any words will do—you aren’t making a sentence.
- Where are you from? Name all the places you’ve lived.
- Do you prefer digital watches and clocks or the kind with hands? Why?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of artificial Christmas trees?

Yuccch! Digital clocks and artificial Christmas trees?! What a snoozer this session would be. UCLA’s Slatcher reports huge differences in the reactions of groups using the “closeness” and “small talk” questions. In fact those participants in the closeness conversations didn’t want to part company afterwards; many were seen exchanging cell phone numbers so they could stay in contact. In contrast, Slatcher described participants emerging from the small-talk session as looking as if they had just come out of a tiring committee meeting; he saw no evidence whatsoever that they had any interest in staying in touch with one another.

Aron’s procedure has worked well in the lab. But can these questions be used to get to know people in ordinary life? Aron thinks they can, but with one caveat: You should not jump too fast. The procedure is based on long-standing research showing that the best way to build a friendship is to escalate self-disclosure gradually, essentially moving through McAdams’s levels. So you should begin with the relatively tame questions—say, “Who would you invite to dinner if you
could pick anyone at all?—and take time to work up to the more intense ones, such as “If you knew you were going to die in a year, what would you change about how you are living now?” When a conversation becomes boring or superficial, Aron himself uses questions from his test to spark interesting discussions and deepen friendships.

Of course, even without Aron’s clever questioning, most of us develop our own informal conversational ploys to move beyond McAdams’s first level of acquaintanceship. But how do we accomplish this? How do we communicate our thoughts, preferences, feelings, and values? And how does what we talk about influence our impressions of one another? My collaborator Jason Rentfrow and I decided to learn more about these conversations. We were particularly interested in seeing which topics came up, because that would tell us where people believed they could acquire useful information about others. We devised a six-week study to track conversations among strangers, all young adults, as they got to know each other. Instead of allowing our subjects to engage in face-to-face interactions, we arranged for them to communicate on an online bulletin board system. This setup excluded all the extraneous information—that gets conveyed in face-to-face conversations, and it allowed us to monitor exactly what was said.

In the fall of 2002, we enrolled sixty young men and women in our study. We gave the participants no restrictions; we just told them to talk about anything they thought would enable them to get to know one another. Over the next six weeks, as the strangers took the first steps down the path to friendship, we recorded and coded every word that passed between them.

We knew from our previous research that our subjects would be likely to discuss their preferences for books, clothing, movies, sports, music, and television shows. We conducted this study during football season at the University of Texas, where students take their football seriously, so we added a special “football” category. In the end, we identified and coded seven topics: books, clothing, movies,
music, television shows, football, and sports other than football. We used a computer program to measure how frequently each of these topics cropped up in conversation.

The results were striking. As you can see in figure 3.1, music was by far the most commonly discussed of the topics. During the first week, 58 percent of participants talked about music; movies (41 percent) and football (41 percent) were next. As the weeks wore on, people began to move beyond the assigned categories, but music continued to be among the most commonly discussed topics; only once in the first six weeks was it not the most discussed topic. It is a testament to the perceived informative value of music that even when people were free to discuss anything they considered relevant to the task of becoming acquainted, the majority chose to talk about music.
Of course, not all groups would use music preferences as a rapid form of communication; music is particularly salient to young people who are struggling to discover and define who they really are. For them, music is an extraordinarily useful language—it can express many different messages (I’m rebellious or angry or traditional or bitter or wholesome, or any combination of these), there are no external constraints determining what you can like (you can’t be too tall to like Goth music), and, crucially, the language is widely understood by the people you’re trying to communicate with. At other times, or in other groups, another medium might jump to the fore: Parents of young children might communicate their values and identity in conversations about playgroups and pediatricians, about where they plan to send their daughters to school or what videos they let their sons watch. There again, the language would be widely understood by the group members. But even this medium would not offer the flexibility and versatility of music preferences.

Carefully controlled research projects like our getting-to-know-you study need to be backed up with evidence from the messy difficult-to-control, but real, world. In modern Western societies, this evidence is best found on Internet dating Web sites, such as e-harmony or match.com. Here, someone who wants a platonic or an intimate relationship can search thousands of user profiles for potential matches; with this information in hand, the lonely hearts must decide whether to move on to the next stage of e-intimacy. Dating companies compete fiercely to win your business, so user profiles feature the categories that are believed to be rich in personal information. When we visited the ten most popular online dating Web sites (purely for research purposes, of course), we found that 90 percent of them asked users questions about their music preferences. This was entirely consistent with our snooping research, which has shown that music consistently trumps books, clothing, food, movies, and television shows in helping people get to know each other. And we’ll come to see in chapter 7 what can be learned from different music tastes.
IDENTITY

Once you’ve dug through the traits and personal concerns of McAdams’s first two levels, you strike the bedrock of personality—identity. McAdams describes his third level, identity, as “an inner story of the self that integrates the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future to provide a life with unity, purpose, and meaning.” Thus, identity brings coherence to the different elements of our lives; it is the thread that ties the experiences of our past, present, and future into one narrative. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if my colleague Jack—the one who was constantly beating the odds against him to prove others wrong—held a memory from an early experience, like being ridiculed by a critical and unsupportive parent, that served to drive his narrative, perhaps with the theme-making appearances later in adolescence and during his early career. Now that theme of fighting those who don’t believe in him drives and guides his future behaviors. And it may work in good ways, too, perhaps motivating him to show them all by writing a book and also making up for the harsh parenting he suffered by building close relationships with his children and grandchildren. These kinds of events are what the psychologist Jeffer son Singer, of Connecticut College, calls “self-defining memories” because they help explain who you are as an individual.

Our identities have many parts, and it is amazing how easily we can integrate new pieces into our coherent sense of self. I remember driving to work several years ago, having recently made the decision to write this book. I was listening to a radio interview with Tom Clancy. He started a sentence with the phrase “We writers . . .” and then went on to explain the challenges and pleasures of the writing life. Without realizing what I was doing, I found myself nodding knowingly, saying to myself, “Yes, we do encounter those challenges, don’t we?” At that point, I still hadn’t written a word of text, yet I had somehow begun to integrate the role of “writer” into my identity. It was preposterous behavior and I was grateful there was nobody there to witness it.
Elements of identity can wax and wane with the circumstances; I am English, but this had never been a central component to how I saw myself until I moved to the United States, where my Englishness suddenly became much more salient. My accent stands out much more in Austin than it does in London, and in the eyes of others (and hence myself), I have become the ambassador of all things English. How you define yourself is influenced to a large degree by your context. For example, when I lived in England, I didn’t think of myself as European because that term mainly referred to the continental Europeans over there across the English Channel. But from over here, that tiny sliver of water between us and the French seems so very irrelevant; I’ve been integrated into Europe, even in my own mind.

Identity is deeply rooted in all of us but—my instant-writer self-image notwithstanding—it typically isn’t articulated explicitly. Rarely is someone able to describe his or her identity on demand. It needs to be drawn out. As part of his research program, McAdams has developed an interview explicitly tailored to elicit the elements of identity. Learning the intimate details about someone can bring you closer—perhaps closer than you want to be, as we saw from Arthur Aron’s research—the interview comes with a whole set of warnings. McAdams urges both the interviewer and interviewee to think carefully about whether their relationship is prepared for the increase in intensity that such an interaction nearly always produces.

Based on the idea that identities involve developing stories, not snapshots of single instances, McAdams’s interview starts by asking you to break your life up into chapters. People vary in how they do this—some use chronological eras, such as grade-school, high school, college, work; others use critical incidents, like their parents’ divorce, the accident, their first kiss; some use thematic systems, such as work, education, romance, play. The interview continues to ask questions about the very good and very bad experiences in your life, about your heroes and your turning points.
As you might expect, McAdams’s interview yields a wonderfully rich harvest of personal information; typically, even people who believe they know you well will learn a lot more about you from such an intimate encounter. But from a research perspective the challenge lies in bringing the information together to form a coherent picture of a person. Unlike information on traits, which can be collected in minutes and readily compared, the differences between these portraits are difficult to quantify. However, identity lies at the core of who we are, so really getting to know someone means locating this core.

Most of us don’t have access to McAdams’s formal method of eliciting information about identity. But, happily, snooping is a good shortcut to this key component of personality because much of our everyday stuff holds clues to identity. As I noted in chapter 1, a good place to find these clues is in the photos of themselves that people choose to display. When I was last in New York City I visited John, a good friend of mine, who is a faculty member at NYU. He is the quintessential academic intellectual—widely read, cultured, philosophical, and sophisticated—and he has long been politically active. These are genuine features of his personality and they are, I believe, also central components of his identity. As I was waiting for John to finish a phone call, my eyes wandered to an old photograph from a college newspaper that he had framed and placed on top of a filing cabinet. The photograph depicts a student protest and, there at the front of the march, was John back in his days as a student activist. Near the news story were a couple of posters—one advertised a play inspired by the works of Kafka and the other was a print commemorating a Salvador Dali exhibition. Although he genuinely liked how the images looked, they resonated with John’s sense of who he was, reminding him of interests and episodes consistent with his self-views as a cultured person (I subsequently learned that the print also reminded him of a childhood visit with his grandfather to the Dali Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida). Later, I had a chance to stay in John’s apartment in Budapest. There on the bookshelf was a framed
photo of John as a boy deeply engrossed in a game of chess with his father, a professor of philosophy. It was not a photo of John playing soccer (which he had done) or on an adventure with his high-school friends or drinking beer in a ski chalet in Utah. It seemed to me that the photo that had made it all the way to the bookshelf helped John connect with his deeply rooted intellectual leanings and that this element of his personality reflected his close bond with his father.

McAdams makes an important point about identity: It is a story you tell about yourself to make sense out of what has happened in the past and the kind of person you are now. From this perspective, it is not essential that the story be true. I see myself as culturally adventurous (that is, high on openness). I happen to believe this is also true—that is, compared with others, I would be relatively open to trying new things on a menu, taking up new activities, visiting new places, and so on. But, from McAdams’s perspective, when we’re talking about identity, whether our beliefs about ourselves are true or not is pretty much irrelevant.

This is why McAdams brilliantly invokes the concept of a myth when talking about the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves—like ancient myths, they’re coherent narratives that may or may not be true. So how can I tell whether being open is part of my identity (irrespective of whether it’s true)? One way is to see how I react when my openness is challenged. If someone accuses me of being closed-minded, it’s remarkable to watch myself leap into action to protect my identity. “Oh, yes, you think I’m closed-minded, do you?... Excuse me one moment. . . . Waiter, I’ve changed my mind about the crème brûlée. I’ll have the seared tripe ice cream with the lawn-grass reduction.” My reaction would show that being open is central to how I see myself—just as my colleague Jack envisions himself locked in struggle against imaginary oppressors who seek to hold him back. How I feel about my openness is different from how I feel about my other traits. Should you accuse me of being too talkative or too quiet or too messy or too neat, I would be just fine with that because those traits are not tied so tightly to how I see myself.
An interesting source of clues about identity are the signature quotations at the foot of e-mails, where people display phrases that connect to a particularly salient piece of their identity. Below are eight quotations pasted from the signature sections of e-mails I have collected in the past few years:

A. “An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.” —MLK, Jr.

B. “Solutions that ignore causation solve nothing.”

C. “There are two primary choices in life: to accept conditions as they exist, or accept the responsibility for changing them.” —Denis Waitley

D. “You know, it’s a small world . . . but I wouldn’t want to have to paint it.” —Steven Wright

E. “There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.” —Elie Wiesel

F. “Basic psychology is one of my subroutines.” —A. Schwarzenegger as T3

G. “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” —Eleanor Roosevelt

H. “I’ll play it first and tell you what it is later.” —Miles Davis

See if you can match these to the people who sent the e-mails:

1. A police officer
2. A graduate student interested in evolutionary explanations for human behavior
3. A nerdy computer technician
4. The director of an Hispanic research center
5. A professor of animal behavior known for taking giant imaginative intellectual leaps
6. An undergraduate student hoping to be admitted to our Ph.D. program
7. A psychology professor
8. A low-ranking person in an organization who had just taken the plunge and sent out an e-mail to the whole organization detailing a superior’s sexual misconduct

So how did you do matching the e-mail signature quotations to the people who sent them? Here are the answers:

Table 3.1 Signature Quotations Matched with their Originators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>This quote</th>
<th>was in an email from</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. “An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.” —MLK, Jr.</td>
<td>4. The director of an Hispanic research center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. “Solutions that ignore causation solve nothing.”</td>
<td>2. A graduate student interested in evolutionary explanations for human behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. “There are two primary choices in life: to accept conditions as they exist, or accept the responsibility for changing them.” —Denis Waitley</td>
<td>1. A police officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. “You know, it’s a small world . . . but I wouldn’t want to have to paint it.” —Steven Wright</td>
<td>3. A nerdy computer technician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. “There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.” —Elie Wiesel</td>
<td>8. A low-ranking person in an organization who had just taken the plunge and sent out an e-mail to the whole organization detailing a superior’s sexual misconduct</td>
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<tr>
<td>F. “Basic psychology is one of my subroutines.” —A. Schwarzenegger as T3</td>
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Even if you only got a few right (getting more than one is beating chance), that’s a pretty impressive feat when you consider the task: to match a few words pasted at the end of an e-mail to an exceptionally brief description of a person you had not even heard of just minutes ago. Each of the quotations resonated with the person who sent it. For some of them, the connection is clearer than for others: that the psychology professor chose the Terminator quotation about psychology being one of his subroutines is not surprising; nor is the choice of the MLK quotation by the director of a center focused on an ethnic minority. But the “Solutions that ignore causation solve nothing” quotation could have belonged to several people on that list; perhaps most likely was the animal behavior professor. However, even when we don’t know exactly why the person chose that particular quotation, we still learn something about the sender, and in doing so we have collected another piece of the personality puzzle. We may not know the full story connecting the animal behavior professor to the “I’ll play it first and tell you what it is later” quotation, but merely knowing they are associated may tell us about his approach to life and science—one that is whimsical and playful and embraces the (as yet) unknown.

Your e-mail signature quotations may change over time; especially when you go through a major transition, such as leaving home to go to college, getting your first job, becoming a parent, or getting divorced. I saw an interesting e-mail example of this when I accepted an undergraduate to work with me as a Ph.D. student. Here’s what appeared at the foot of her e-mail when she was still attending a small liberal arts college:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead

Only a matter of days later, just after she had been accepted into our program where she would soon embark on her career as a scientist, the quotation had changed:
Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.
—Albert Einstein

Several years later when I showed my student the quotations, she confirmed the shift in identity. The first reflected her self-image as an activist idealist college student. Later, although she still believed in the quotation’s message, it had become less central to her identity, which had become wrapped up in the challenges of doing good science.

Other e-mail signatures illustrate continuity. Consider the three quotations below, all received in e-mail correspondences over the course of a year from a student I never met:

Sed Omnia Praeclara Tam Difficilia Quam Rara Sunt (but everything great is just as difficult to realize as it is rare to find).
—Spinoza, Ethics

But the one who feels no distaste in sampling every study, and who attacks his task of learning and cannot get enough of it, him we shall rightly pronounce the lover of wisdom, the philosopher, shall we not?
—Plato’s Republic

Creativity is not merely the innocent spontaneity of youth and childhood; it must also be married to a passion of the adult being, which is a passion to live beyond one’s death.
—Rollo May

Each of these conveys a similar high-minded, almost pretentious, message about the noble but demanding journey toward achieving greatness, wisdom, or creativity. It seems the student has internalized the identity of an intellectual—one who sees himself as part of a rich tradition. If I had the task of buying him a gift, I’d head straight to the

**THE PUZZLE OF PERSONALITY**

I was not the only one intrigued by McAdams’s characterization of Lynn; indeed, it was at the urging of my graduate students that I stalked him at the conference and asked him whether Lynn existed. The answer was yes and no. It turns out that Lynn was a composite of several real people. I have to admit that I was disappointed to learn that this character McAdams had portrayed so vividly wasn’t out there in the world—though I surely wasn’t as disappointed as the man who, according to McAdams, claimed to have fallen in love with her!

But McAdams’s contribution goes far beyond clever portraiture. The crucial lesson from his work is that getting to know someone is not just a matter of knowing more about the person; that “more” must be a different kind of information. You have to go beyond traits, such as how kind the person is or how talkative; you have to begin understanding the person’s goals and values: what she hopes to accomplish in her career, how she feels about being a parent, whether she believes in a higher power, whether she strives for excitement in her life, or craves family security, or covets success in her career. And to know someone really well, you must go even deeper, ultimately learning about the person’s identity, a concept that, as we shall see, is crucial to the snooping I have done in bedrooms, offices, Web sites, and music collections.