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BOOK REVIEW

Eleanor Buelke

Gaylin, Willard

Feelings:

Our Vital Signs

New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979. Pp. xiv + 254.

Feelings . . . are testament to our capacity for choice and learning. Feelings are the instruments of rationality, not—as some would have it—alternatives to it. Because we are intelligent creatures—meaning that we are freed from instinctive and patterned behavior to a degree unparalleled in the animal kingdom—we are capable of, and dependent on, using rational choices to decide our futures. Feelings become guides to that choice.

In this book, Dr. Gaylin deals with feelings as messages to the cognitive processes. As such, they may be used by teachers as an important part of learning guides to decide and to determine behavior, “fine tunings” directing ways of meeting and manipulating environments. Here, for purposes of analysis and discussion, he has divided the wide range of feelings into three groups: those giving direction toward individual survival and the obligations of group living; those serving to warn that there is a depletion or malfunctioning of the life resources; and those acknowledging a meaning to life beyond mere survival, one that includes pleasure, goodness, and joy.

Using these general categories, the author has organized this text into Part I, Signals for Survival: Serving Self and Group; Part II, Caution Signals: The Center Is Not Holding; and Part III, Signals of Success: Reaching Out and Moving Up. In Part I, he discusses feeling anxious, feeling guilty, feeling ashamed, and feeling proud. In Part II, he writes about feeling upset, feeling tired, feeling bored, feeling envious, and feeling used. In Part III, he is concerned with feeling touched (and hurt), feeling moved, feeling good, and feelings as responses related to the broader aspect of emotions. Throughout the entire book, he maintains the theme that feelings, no matter what kind they are, need not be obstacles to happiness and productivity. Rather, if they are heeded, trusted, and understood, they become keys to harmony and pride in the whole area of living and creating a satisfying life, for oneself and others.

In writing about feelings as signals for survival, for self and the group, this author provokes thought with some interesting statements about the usefulness of such signals and the significance of their mis-use, or corruption. He questions whether one’s inner feelings always have

legitimate claim to public expression. He suggests that public displays of bad temper, foul language, and ill-humor might be forms of littering and contamination of the environment. Perhaps, responsibility to the social unit, and personal dignity as well, call for a certain evasion and reserve. Because the human life is not a predictable, fixed, instinctual life, individuals must always endure *feelings of anxiety* for the privilege of freedom. Because humans depend upon the social good for survival, *guilt feelings* become the guardian of goodness to others. Similarly, *feelings of shame* can be guides to better selves, and insure safety of individuals by supporting the group upon which all depend. Because man is capable of desiring and appreciating intrinsic rewards, *feelings of pride* and pleasure in achievement support developing independence in the human young, and enable them to move toward accomplishments and gratifications of maturity that extend “the meaning of *human* survival beyond the mere perpetuation of a biological shell.”

The feelings Gaylin calls caution signals serve as alerting mechanisms, as indices of levels of functioning. *Feeling upset* warns that one is particularly vulnerable to events that may cause one to lose control. Expressions of *feelings of being tired* are more likely to refer to a psychological state that signals vulnerability to depression than to a purely physical state. They may indicate that it is time to strive, to push, to expand one's life, to stretch one's potential a little further. *Feeling bored* is interpreted as a call to action, a rapping for attention to the quality of one's life, and for applying the greatest antidote to boredom—new mastery of new learnings. Recognizing *feelings of envy* alerts one to a situation of growing alienation from common purposes and shared joys and achievements with others. When the self is used, or given, with pride and pleasure, a sense of self-worth is built and enhanced; but, if one's intelligence, creativity, companionship, or love should be taken away, or exploited by others, without regard for one's person, *feelings of being used* result. To read this signal accurately requires understanding the context of the use. To be of service in the context of love is appropriate and allows for generosity of spirit, accompanied by generation of self-esteem.

The signals for success are largely positive feelings, pointed toward life's meaning, not its mere survival. *Feeling touched* is possible only within the frame of reference of human contacts and caring relationships. “People need people not simply to survive but to embroider and enrich that survival.” The deeper, more intense *feeling of being moved* is related more often to certain events, sensations, concepts, and abstractions. It is a reminder that beneath the simple experiences of routine existence lie symbolic meanings that are the nascence of wonder, elation, and joyous encounters with life. There follows, then, the combination of intelligence and sensate pleasure, the learning experience, an enlargement of self, which yields the specific qualities of *feeling good*. That “sense of good feeling, whether exploited for other purposes or enjoyed directly, is the sole support of the value of living in this world.”

No student or teacher, no one, lives entirely within the real world. All

live in spaces of their own, and their responses to the world they perceive are dominated by feelings. The challenge to grasp the value of these directives, to help students understand and trust these signals, thrusts teachers directly into encounters which develop their own humanity day-by-day in their work.

Feelings are internal directives essential for human life. In addition, and not just in passing, they are their own rewards. They are the means and the ends. All goodness and pleasure must be ultimately perceived in the realm of feelings. It is in the balance of small passions of daily existence that we measure and value our lives.