

Original Message

From: Payton. Robert

Sent: Saturday, September 15, 2001 11:10 AM

Subject: Tool of thought

This rudimentary device has often helped me organize my thought. It describes five levels of awareness:

The first level is not awareness at all; it is merely "noise," the background before one becomes aware there is one.

The second level is "information," when we become conscious of the noise.

The third level is "knowledge," the moment at which we recognize what the information is about.

The fourth level is "understanding," the point at which we fit the new knowledge into our scheme of things, into what's going on, as best we can tell.

The fifth and highest level is "wisdom," when we identify and grasp the correct meaning and value that emerges from what has been until then ambiguous or confusing or misleading.

I would add a sixth level: when we begin to act on our wisdom (especially when we try to convey it to others).

As I look at the journal entries I've made recently, my words before last Tuesday seem now to have been merely noise: reports from the zone of superficiality and familiarity in which we lead our lives most of the time. The abrupt confrontation with information came Tuesday morning, when Polly called from Conner Prairie and told me to turn on television. Information became knowledge when I saw the images of the destruction of the World Trade Center. Knowledge moved to understanding when I was told that what had happened was not an accident but an act of terrorism beyond anything I have ever known.

Since then -- almost all day every day at the television set or reading the New York Times -- I have revisited each of those levels a hundred times. Each time I reached the level I've called "understanding" I've found myself crying. There have been other moments of great sadness -- that this could happen to the world I will leave to my students and my two grandsons. But as some of you know I think of myself as a meliorist: I live by the doctrine that the world can be made better by rightly-directed human effort. Rightly-directed human effort follows an assessment and interpretation of

what has happened which in turn leads to thoughts of what is to be done. I am a teacher by trade, and my first impulse was to meet with my students. We did that yesterday.

There is too much loose talk about "war." People who use that word carelessly know nothing of what war is like. Instead of, or in addition to, thinking about a war on terrorism, we should be trying to think about peace as something more than the exhausted end of armed conflict. We don't know our enemy. Not only do we not know where he is, but we don't know who he is or what he believes or why. To write him off as "evil" is dangerously naive. The acts were certainly evil, if that word has any meaning at all. But the perpetrators of the acts are human; there but for the grace of God go you and I.

My grandson sat in with us at the coffee shop and observed the discussion. The Fellows earned their credentials: they were thoughtful, sensible, sensitive, and ready to find something useful to do. I'll share with you what they come up with. At the same time, I hope more of you share your ideas with them. It is a very good time for all of the Jane Addams Fellows, past and present (and the RAs and Group II and others who may have been part of the conversation), to put something on the record.

RLP