

Uncommon Sense

Providing Clarity, Promoting Intelligence

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Issue #235

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Welcome to the latest (and the very late) issue of *Uncommon Sense*. Let's get to it:

The **Self-Development** column explores the notion of Critical Thinking, a type of ruminating that is often in short supply.

We continue to review our Founding Fathers in the **Elephant in the Room** column, this time turning the spotlight on the often underrated John Adams.

I offer some musings on scam artists in the **From Ara's Journal** column.

And, as always, we bring up the rear with **The World of Words** column and provide you with yet another gem from our dynamic English language.

OK, let's get started.

Ara Norwood



Self-Development

Critical Thinking

Consider this question: What is 5×5 ?

My guess is that you had a number in your mind, and it appeared there rather quickly and effortlessly. The number was 25. You did not think "26" or "18" or "41." You couldn't help but think of the number 25. It was automatic. It required very little in the way of cognitive effort.

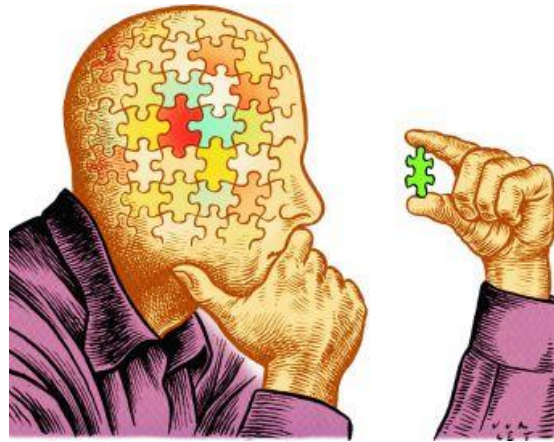
Now consider this question: What is 45.7×5.9 ?

Of course, you could provide the correct answer if you reached for a calculator. But let us say the use of a calculator was forbidden. Could you answer it with the same ease with

which you answered the first question? Doubtful. However, if you grabbed a pencil and a sheet of paper, and you really concentrated, you could, by working it out manually, come up with the correct answer, which happens to be 269.63. It would take you perhaps 36 seconds to do this.

What's the difference?

The difference is that in the first instance, you engaged in normative thinking. That type of thinking is largely automatic. It is fast. And it takes very little, if any, effort. In the second instance, you had to put in a great deal more effort. It required a lot of concentration. It was slow and deliberate and methodical. We call this second type of thinking Critical Thinking. The difference between the two types of thinking is analogous to the difference between a car with an automatic transmission, and a car with a manual transmission. The first is effortless; the second requires a certain amount of complexity.



Examples of Normative Thinking include:

- Detecting that one object is more distant than another.
- Orienting to the source of a sudden sound.
- Completing the phrase "bread and . . ."
- Detecting hostility in a voice.
- Driving a car on an empty road.
- Understanding simple sentences.

Examples of Critical Thinking include:

- Bracing for the starter gun in a race.
- Looking for a woman with white hair.
- Monitoring the appropriateness of your behavior in a social situation.
- Counting the occurrences of the letter "K" in this very column (which happens to be 41).
- Filling out a tax form.
- Checking the validity of a complex logical argument.

And there are times that the simplicity of Normative Thinking can bring disappointing results. Allow an illustration. I was recently shopping for groceries. I saw a large can of mixed nuts. I like mixed nuts, but I don't prefer to have a lot of peanuts for no other reason than I find peanuts a bit too common. I noticed the can of nuts that caught my eye had 5 types of nuts: almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, pecans, and, of course, peanuts. I found that disappointing until I spotted a message written on the label that seemed to be written to people like me. It read, "Less than 50% peanuts." I was sold! I bought the giant can, thankful the manufacturers understood people like me.

However, when I got home and opened the can of mixed nuts, to my dismay it appeared that the dominant nut inside was the peanut. How could this be? Well, let's start thinking critically to understand what happened. If the label is correct that there really is less than 50% peanuts (and I frankly have my doubts about that – as it appears the peanuts make up about 70% of the total) then that could possibly mean the peanuts come in as high as 49%. That would mean the remaining 4 types of nuts would constitute about 51% of the total. If we divide 51% by those 4 types of nuts, each of those remaining 4 types of nuts would only constitute 12.75% of the total – nothing close to the 49% of the total the peanuts would comprise. In fact, there would have to be more than 20% each of the

almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, and pecans in order for the peanuts to occupy a truly minority status! But who has the time or the wherewithal to engage in such calculations? (Answer: those who regularly think critically).

So what is critical thinking, really? It is defined as the disciplined process of conceptualizing, analyzing, synthesizing, or evaluating information gathered from observation, experience, reflection, and reasoning as a guide to belief and action. The critical thinker's toolbox includes such things as skepticism, curiosity, logic, and the use of questions.

My own experience has taught me that to do critical thinking one must go through three distinct processes. One must see RED (Reason, Evaluate, Decide).

When I say Reason, I am talking about the process of deciding to switch from Normative Thinking to Critical Thinking. It is really all about just exploring and getting some understanding of what you are really dealing with. The Evaluate phase is about doing actual analysis. It's working out the math when considering buying the mixed nuts. It's analyzing the pros and cons. It's reaching a conclusion. The Decide phase is about taking what you now know and making a decision. It's about taking a position. It may be about making an argument, if you are exploring options and solutions with colleagues.

The paragraph above represents a crash-course in the Critical Thinking. To the degree that you engage in such processes, you will have a better understanding of the complexities that surround you, the decisions you make will be wiser, and you may even make the right purchases when it comes to mixed nuts.

The Elephant in the Room

John Adams

Allow me to share a few thoughts about our second President of the United States. I consider John Adams to be one of the most under-appreciated of our Founding Fathers. This is a man who had deep respect for his parents, especially his father. While we don't get a lot of information in the historical record of his views of his mother, it was clear he loved her deeply, referring to Susanna Boylston Adams as his "Honored and beloved mother." But in the case of his father, there are a number of recorded statements that show John Adams considered his father, also known as John Adams, as a larger-than-life figure, calling him the most honest (he used the term "honestest") man he ever knew. Practically idolizing his father for his honesty, independent spirit, and love of country, the younger Adams said, "In wisdom, piety, benevolence, and charity in proportion to his education and sphere of life, I have never known his superior."

I believe John Adams was also blessed by his choice of spouse, Abigail Smith. Abigail was almost a decade younger than John, whom he first met when she was a mere 15 years of age. At first, John showed no interest in this teenage girl. But they crossed paths again two years after that initial visit, and John was smitten. Three years later, when she was 20 and he was 29, they were married, and thus began one of the truly impressive life-long romances based on a foundation of solid friendship, with her beginning most of her letters to him with the salutation, "My Dearest Friend." They ended up having six children, 3 sons and 3 daughters. Their first child, a daughter, was named after her mother Abigail; she was often referred to as Nabby. Their second child, named after his great-grandfather, was none other than John Quincy Adams who became our 6th President. Their third child was Baby Susanna. John often referred to her as "Little Suky," but as she was sick much of her short life, she passed away shortly after turning 1. John was so grief-stricken, he could not bring himself to even speak of her for years.

It is not surprising that John Adams began his career as a lawyer, having been mentored by prominent lawyers such as James Otis, Jr., of Boston, and Oxenbridge Thacher. And he turned out to be a rather effective lawyer.

While many so-called progressives today assume, falsely, that the Founding Fathers – all of them – were slave-holders, they just don't know their history. They don't know John Adams who, as a northerner, never owned any slaves at any time in his life. In his own words, "I have, through my whole life, held the practice of slavery in such abhorrence, that I have never owned a negro or any other slave; though I have lived for many years in times when the practice was not disgraceful; when the best men in my vicinity thought it not inconsistent with their character; and when it has cost me thousands of dollars of the labor and subsistence of free men, which I might have saved by the purchase of negroes at times when they were very cheap."

During the letters he exchanged with Thomas Jefferson late in life, he finally broached the subject of slavery. But Jefferson never responded to those segments of Adams' letters.

And Adams was rather prescient about the divisive nature of slavery on the nation as a whole: when Missouri was being considered of being admitted into the union as a slave state, Adams wrote that he felt a struggle between the states over slavery "might rend this mighty fabric in twain." Later on still, in writing to his daughter-in-law, Louisa Catherine, he had visions of horrible massacres of blacks killing whites, and in their turn, whites slaughtering blacks, until whites, driven to madness and wickedness, would exterminate the blacks. He confided to another correspondent that all possible humanity should be shown the blacks, and while he did not pretend to know what the solution to the presence of slavery should be, he was certain it should not be allowed to expand. He told Thomas Jefferson that slavery was a black cloud over the nation.

A deeply religious man, Adams, following the death of his beloved wife Abigail (who died on October 28, 1818), received a letter of condolence from Thomas Jefferson, and Adams responded, he said, "I believe in God and in his wisdom and benevolence, and I cannot conceive that such a Being could make such a species as the human merely to live and die on this earth. If I did not believe in a future state, I should believe in no God."

This brief note barely captures the significance of John Adams, a man of enormous learning, and man of unbounded integrity.

* * * * *

And that, my friends, is the latest elephant in the room.

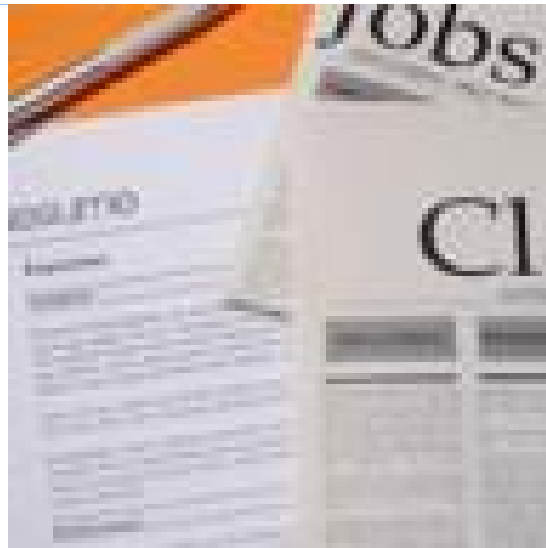
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From Ara's Journal

On Being Conned

There are people out there who spend their waking hours looking for the next person they can con. Evidently they do not believe they can make it in this world on their own merits, so they work at perfecting the art of deception, pretending they are something they are not, and searching for their next victim. Many of these con artists use flattery in an attempt to lasso their victims into a trusting relationship, and once the con artist finds a way to cull some money from the unsuspecting dupe, the thief vanishes into the night, never to be heard from again.



Most of us have received those emails purporting to be from some individual who has a lot of money they wish to give to us – provided we give them our bank account information so they can transfer millions of dollars into our account. I marvel at how many otherwise intelligent people have fallen for such a scam. I can say with confidence that people do fall for such nonsense, because if no one ever did, the con artists would look for another method.

Dating sites are notorious for such con-artistry. Many women I know who frequent dating sites tell me of men courting them while shielded by the anonymity that comes with interacting on the internet. Such men, who claim to have American names like George Brown, Jim Johnson, or David Cathcart, consistently refuse to receive an actual phone call from the woman they are courting, and the excuse is always the same: they claim to be overseas, serving in the U.S. Armed Forces, and cannot receive phone calls. Of course, if they ever allowed themselves to be on an actual phone call with an American woman, the woman would understandably wonder why Jim Johnson's accent sounds as if he is a citizen of Nigeria.

Men are just as targeted. It seems that every man I know who is on a dating site has fallen under the spell of an Asian woman, usually from China or Hong Kong. All of these women tell the same story: they are from the man's local area and own a home there, but fled to China or Hong Kong due to the pandemic. And all of these women are experts in online trading of foreign currencies and futures. All of them claim to be very rich, and all of them have never incurred a single loss in their trades over the span of several years. That is like a baseball player claiming that every time he is up at bat, he not only gets a hit, but hits a home run with the bases loaded – 100% of the time. These women generously want to help American men get rich, and so, out of the kindness of their heart, they assure the American men that if they just put \$50,000 cash into an overseas account, the women will help the men achieve the same remarkable trades in the foreign currency market, and see instant profits in the range of \$380,000 after a few short minutes of trading. It's easy. Happens all the time. And again, what is remarkable is how many men fall for such claims. They never see their money again.

Many con artists are very good at what they do. They know how to move slowly over time, convincing their victims that they (the con artist) are there to help. For the gullible, the result is betrayal, humiliation, and loss, followed by bitterness and cynicism.

The World of Words

Milieu

Building Your Power of Expression

Milieu, n.

Pronunciation: mil'yoo, mil'yə(r)



Meaning: This nifty word, taken from the French, refers to a person's social environment. It essentially means the characteristic atmosphere which surrounds a notable event or series of events. It is a general, broad, overarching attribute that gives context to a physical location or set of occurrences. Essentially, it describes the type of environment in which things happen.

Usage:

- *Jefferson Airplane was an obvious choice to perform at Woodstock in 1969, as they had been firmly entrenched in the Hippie movement and the Psychedelic Rock milieu of San Francisco.*

- *Sarah's commitment to the law of chastity, meaning no pre-marital sex, stems from her upbringing in a religious milieu, and I deeply admire her for that.*
- *As the son of a legendary pianist, Stephen grew up in a musical milieu.*

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