

# Theories of Intelligence

Bruce Ballenger



*Bruce Ballenger is Professor of English at Boise State University where he teaches courses in composition, composition theory, the essay tradition, and creative nonfiction. He's the author of seven books, including the three texts in the Curious series: The Curious Researcher, The Curious Reader (with Dr. Michelle Payne), and The Curious Writer, all from Longman Publishers. His most recent publication is Crafting Truth: Short Studies in Creative Nonfiction.*

**A**t age 55, I've finally decided I'm not as dumb as I thought. This might seem a strange confession from a professor of English, a man who has spent twenty-five years making his living with his intellect, working all those years in an environment where being "smart" was a quality valued above all others. This revelation—that I'm not as dumb as I thought—is a relief, of course. More and more, I can sit in a meeting of my colleagues and feel okay when I'm unmoved to speak. It pains me less when I can't quite follow

someone's argument or sort out the arcane details of a curriculum proposal. Now, more than ever before, I can stand in front of my classes and say, without shame, "That's a good question. I don't really know the answer."

It's quite possible—no, likely—that I'm not nearly as smart as many of the people around me, but I've learned, at last, not to care. Self-acceptance may simply be one of the few blessings of late middle age. I was watching the news the other day and learned of a report on happiness that suggested the midlife crisis was a universal phenomenon. The study, with the straightforward title "Is Well-Being U-Shaped over the Life Cycle?" reviewed data from two million people in seventy-two countries, and it concluded that American men are most miserable at around age fifty-two, perhaps because they have the sobering realization that life did not unfold the way they hoped it would. Happiness slowly returns when they "adapt to their strengths and weaknesses, and . . . quell their infeasible aspirations" (20). It's a great relief for me to know that things should be looking up.

I've considered this idea—that I'm really not that smart but have finally accepted my limitations—but I'm coming around to the belief that I'm probably smarter than I thought I was, that I was *always* smarter than I thought I was. I'm pretty sure this is true for most people, and frankly, the ones who have always known they were really smart—and who behave as if they are quite sure of this—are not the kind of people I usually like very much. Yet even the self-consciously smart people deserve our sympathy because being intelligent really, really matters to most of us. We can live with being unattractive but no one wants to feel dumb.

One of the most popular videos on YouTube is a clip from the Miss Teen USA contest when during the interview segment of the program, Caitlin Upton, the contestant from South Carolina, was asked this question: "Recent polls have shown that a fifth of Americans can't locate the U.S. on a world map. Why do you think this is?" Her response was, sadly, completely incoherent, and the relentless, often unkind ridicule Upton endured prompted her appearance on the *Today Show* a few days later. "I was overwhelmed," she said. "I made a mistake. Everyone makes mistakes. I'm human." I'm ashamed to admit that I joined the throngs who gleefully watched the clip and

enjoyed Upton's humiliation; at the time, I told myself that my response wasn't personal—it just confirmed my belief that beauty pageants are socially bankrupt. But I know that the real reason I enjoyed it was the relief that it wasn't me up there.

The YouTube clip is now painful to watch, not only because the humor in humiliation wears off quickly, but I recognize in Caitlin Upton a phenomenon I see in myself: the sense that how we view our own intelligence is a script that others author and that we cannot revise. Researchers tell us that children typically have two theories of intelligence. Some believe that intelligence is an “uncontrollable trait,” a thing they are stuck with like eye color or big ears. Others, particularly older children, believe that intelligence is “malleable,” something they can alter through effort and hard work (296); I have never met any of these children but apparently they're out there.

It is a nearly inescapable fact of an American childhood that we are branded as smart, or somewhat smart, or not too smart, or even dumb. For many of us who lack faith in our own intelligence, this branding begins in school, a sad fact that researchers say is especially true of African American kids (113). I am white, but can trace my own experience with this by following the scent of old resentments, back to memories of school that never lose their bitter taste even when I try to sweeten them with humor. There was the time in the second grade when I was sent to the back of the room, to sit alone in a corner, because I couldn't remember all the months of the year. And later, in the eighth grade, I moved from green to orange in the SRA reading packet but never moved again. In those days, orangeness was a sign of mediocrity. The shame of never busting through orange to blue, the color Jeff Brickman, Mark Levy, and Betsy Cochran achieved with ease, convinced me that reading and writing were just not my thing, a feeling that was reinforced by my teacher Mrs. O'Neal who spattered my essays with red marks. From then on I hated school, and ironically, especially English (a feeling I freely shared on the inside covers of my class yearbooks). I spent my high school days languishing in “level 3” English and science classes where I joined the working-class Italian-American students from Highwood and the kids from the Army base at Fort Sheridan. We found solidarity in hating Shakespeare, lab reports, and the five paragraph theme. And we

pretended to find solidarity in being dumb, though I think most of us were secretly ashamed.

In my junior year, I dated Jan, one of the “smart” kids who moved in a small herd, migrating from one AP class to another. I was awed by her intelligence, and in the twisted logic of an adolescent male, this awe translated into indifference; I pretended I didn’t really care about her. Eventually, however, I found Jan’s persistent kindness moving and began to write her bad poetry that she copied and bound into a book that she gave me for my birthday. For a time, I entertained the idea that I wasn’t unintelligent. Not smart, exactly, not like Jan, but maybe I could hold my own in the AP crowd. Yet what I did not understand back then was that whatever small gains I was making in school could easily be undone at home.

There was never any question that I would go to college. My parents expected it, and so did I. But I knew that I was not destined to go anywhere Jan and her friends were headed—the University of Michigan, Brown, Tufts, Beloit, Kalamazoo. I applied to one school, Drake, with rolling admissions, and when I was accepted early, I excused myself from the endless senior chatter about colleges. I pretended I just didn’t care. “You’re selling yourself short,” my father said, disappointed that I wouldn’t pursue more schools. My brother—who was two years older—attended my father’s alma mater, the University of Rochester, a school with high academic standards. Dad never encouraged me to apply there, confirming what I had already suspected—that I was a dimmer bulb.

My father was an intelligent man, a Rhodes scholar with an interest in British literature who worked for both Chicago and New York newspapers before the booze took him down. Nothing pleased him more than an argument. When I went to college in the early seventies it was an easier time for students to believe in values and ideas without being wounded by the charge that they were being “naïve.” My idealism made me an easy target, and when the vodka kicked in, my father would pick up the scent of some belief I held with uninformed fervor and go after it. Even drunk, Dad knew what he was talking about, and with a cold, ruthless logic he would pick apart whatever passion I brought to the dinner table. I felt young, stupid, and hopelessly inadequate. Dad was not a cruel man, but what I know now is

that his head may have been full but his heart was empty. His intellect was one of the last things he clung to as drink became the only way to dull some unspeakable pain; in the end, of course, even intellect succumbs.

There were moments after these arguments when I sat seething and my father would turn to me, wagging his finger. “The most important thing you can be, Bruce,” he said, “is an intellectual. Live the life of the mind.” Oddly enough, I have become an academic, and had he lived, my father would likely have approved. Yet the ache I feel about Dad these days is that he didn’t possess the kind of knowing that might have saved him had he only valued it. One of the things my Dad’s alcoholism taught me was how weak-kneed his kind of intelligence could be against the sucker punches of self-loathing. “Your Dad was just too smart for his own good,” my mother would say. “Just too smart for his own good.”

It took me a long time to see the truth in what my mom said. In college, I deflected the insecurity I felt about my intellect with an angry activism. I wrote self-important and smug columns for the student newspaper—a weekly feature called “In Defense of Nature”—chastising the student body for ignoring the environmental crisis. Only my friends read my rants, and they were kind about them. But I was also relatively successful in school and went on to graduate school at the University of Michigan and later the University of New Hampshire and did fine there, too. This evidence of intellect, accumulated over twelve years of college and graduate school, unfortunately had little effect on how I felt about myself. All it took was a moment when I felt stupid—moments we all have—and I was that boy at the dinner table again, unable to argue successfully with his intoxicated parent. Once I was invited to participate in a debate with a radio station representative over the FCC’s Fairness Doctrine, which required TV and radio stations to air public service material. At the time, I was working as a spokesperson for a consumer group. The debate was staged in a public library before a group of elderly residents from a small Connecticut town, and the radio guy quickly stripped away the pretense that I knew what I was talking about. I slinked out of the room when it was over without speaking to anyone. On the drive home I sat tight-lipped and pale, furious with myself for being so stupid.

Theories of intelligence have evolved considerably since I was a child, a time when everyone was taking IQ tests. In the early eighties, Howard Gardener's "multiple intelligences" came as a relief to many of us whose scores on intelligence tests were not worth bragging about. Back then, I never really understood Gardener's theory but seized on the idea that being smart didn't necessarily mean being smart in one way. Yet I always sensed that, no matter what Gardener said, there was a kind of intelligence that really counted and that I didn't possess. It was school smarts—the ability to pick apart an argument, to recognize the logical fallacy, and to make an arresting point—all of the things, I see now, that my father could do so well. As an academic, I see these qualities in some of my colleagues, something I admire and envy. A very few of them, however, use their intelligence to bully people like my father bullied me.

Before I entered the profession, I imagined that many professors were like these intellectual bullies, people who bludgeon others with reason, looking to wound rather than to enlighten. The literary critic Jane Tompkins once wrote that college teachers are often driven by fear, "fear of being shown up for what you are: a fraud, stupid, ignorant, a clod, a dolt, a sap, a weakling, someone who can't cut the mustard" (654), and this is what drives us to do everything we can to prove to our students and others that we're intellectually superior. In rare cases, this fear of being found out turns teachers into intellectual bullies. More often, their anxiety in the classroom leads to what Tompkins calls the "performance model" of instruction: teachers talking at their students, teachers trying desperately to demonstrate how smart they are. It probably is no surprise that this tendency moves easily from the classroom to the department faculty meeting where the stakes feel higher.

I can't recall how exactly things began to change for me, when I started to see that I might revise the script that had governed my life for so long, but I started to notice it in those department meetings. Whether I spoke or not ceased to matter. I didn't decide one day that I was just as smart as my colleagues. I didn't suddenly start believing the strong evidence that I must have some intellectual ability since I enjoyed a successful career as a college professor. There was no sudden epiphany or dramatic moment. I think I just stopped being afraid.

It has helped to know, too, that my own ideas about intelligence don't travel well. In a famous study, developmental psychologist Joseph Glick asked a Liberian Kpelle tribesman to sort twenty items—food, tools, and cooking utensils—in a way that made “sense” to him. He did this quickly enough, pairing a knife with an orange, a potato with a hoe, and other matches that reflected the practical, functional relationships between the items. “This is what a wise man would do,” said the tribesman. The researchers then asked, “What would a fool do?” The Liberian then sorted the items in what we would consider “logical” categories, putting food in one pile, cooking utensils in another, tools in another, and so on (84–87). I live a world away, of course, where as I write this my wife, Karen, is putting away the groceries using a logic that a Kpelle tribesman might find curious. The definition of a fool, obviously, depends on who and where you are.

My self-doubts will never go away completely, but I think they have made me a better teacher. I have empathy for my own students in whom I see the same struggle. Just the other night, in a graduate seminar, Greg, a particularly bright student, derailed himself in mid-sentence while interpreting a passage from a Montaigne essay we were reading. “My head just isn't working tonight,” he said. “I don't know what's wrong with me.” I reassured him that he was making perfect sense, but for the rest of the class Greg was solemn, his hand fixed on his forehead concealing a brow darkened by frustration. Ironically, Montaigne, a sixteenth-century philosopher and father of the personal essay, constantly questioned his own intelligence, and in the piece we were reading that night Montaigne writes that his “mind is lazy and not keen; it can not pierce the least cloud” (213). And yet, Montaigne's work celebrated his shortcomings as well as his strengths, the very things that make us human. Learning's highest calling, he thought, was to know oneself, and the essay seemed the best vessel into which this self-reflection might be poured, as I have done here.

On the advice of a friend, I recently took up meditation, a practice that often involves visualization. Sometimes as I listen to the slow rhythm of my breathing there are moments when I meet myself on a beach on Nantucket Island, a place I spent a spring nearly thirty years ago. There are just the two of us there, one young with a navy blue beret and his hands thrust in the pockets of his khaki pants, and the

other the grayer, bearded man I see in the mirror these days. I am walking with that younger self on the empty beach at sunset, and I have my arm around his shoulders. I am whispering something to him meant to be comforting. I might be saying many things, but lately I imagine it is this: "You're going to be okay." I think that learning to fully believe this will be the smartest thing I'll ever do.

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