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Although not a historian (except marginally perhaps of the Inuit), writer Gretel Ehrlich has observed that "...history should show us how to enlarge, deepen, and discipline ourselves". In the same vein, historian Douglas Freeman has said, in speaking of George Washington, "the great fact is that Washington grew". My contention is that all education, in its true sense, is a matter of enlarging, deepening, and disciplining ourselves, growing, and that just as George Washington "grew" during his life, so we (and our students) are able to enlarge and deepen ourselves through the study of Washington's life.

To learn is to change our parameters and perspective, even if only slightly. To come to an understanding or a concept of a situation is to grasp it, which figuratively implies holding on to something new, something additional to what we already know, or are. A natural curiosity, an impulse to know, to understand, is the bedrock motivation for all intellectual activity. This "itch" to deepen oneself through learning varies in range between individual minds (Jefferson perhaps possessed it more than Washington), but it exists in some form in all minds, and it is this human quality which teachers must try to arouse in their students if true learning is to occur.

If to learn is to change, then such activities as rote memorization or inculcation through repetition do not qualify as true learning. To "learn" a list of phone numbers, or a list of Presidents, or to learn how to tie a knot, does not produce a change in one's cognitive awareness. But perhaps the lack of growth in these cases only relates to the intellect. There are other methods of mental growth as well. The feeling of satisfaction a person gets

from mastering a skill may produce an enhanced sense of accomplishment, which would be a significant emotional change, and I think emotional change was a significant factor in Washington's growth.

As Freeman indicates, George Washington learned, changed, and grew throughout his public career. From his youth, Washington seemed to generate an unusually high flow of adrenalin when his physiological system sensed vulnerability or danger. Adrenalin flow prepares one to adopt a "fight or flight" response, and Washington's natural instinct in these situations was to fight. This quality naturally gave him a physical bravery, which he showed early and which never left him. During the French and Indian Wars, when Washington was in his 20's, he found the sound of whistling bullets "charming"; in one battle in western Pennsylvania his coat absorbed multiple bullets while he was having several horses shot from under him. Later, during the Revolution, Washington's officers were concerned (and his troops awed) to see him on more than one occasion stand high and alone on his horse in the direct line of enemy fire.

Physical bravery, obviously, was not something Washington had to learn, or grow into. However, Washington came to understand that his normal physiological "fight" response had to be tempered and controlled, both when it came time for tactical military decisions, and when the criticism or perceived disrespect of others made him feel personally indignant. In these cases Washington learned to step back from his original unfiltered impulses by (a) listening to all available advice in making military and political decisions, and by (b) achieving (usually) control over outward emotional explosions when personal anger seized him.

In his book Washington's Crossing, a detailed account of the New York and New

Jersey campaigns of 1776-77, David Hackett Fischer devotes a full 5 pages (311-316) to contrasting the decision-making styles of Washington and Cornwallis at Princeton.

“Cornwallis arrogated the major decisions entirely unto himself and rejected contrary advice from his officers (315).” In contrast the American staff meeting “...was more open and mixed than Cornwallis’s small aristocratic circle...Nobody doubted Washington was in charge...but their conversation was not constrained by deference. The conversation was free-wheeling, and its tone suggested Washington wanted it that way... Washington did not propose a single course of action as Cornwallis had done. He framed a problem (313).” All officers were encouraged to give input before Washington reached a decision.

This method of decision-making contrasts sharply with Washington’s behavior as a 22-year old Colonel in Western Pennsylvania fighting the French and Indians the summer of 1754. His band of less than 200 men hastily erected a small redoubt (Fort Necessity) in a meadow near the French Fort Duquesne. His position was unprotected against a siege or attack from the woods surrounding it. According to Robert Jones, in his biography of Washington, “...a council of officers on June 28 advised the Colonel to pull back to Wills Creek...[but]...the young commander was not worried about the delay in his own departure because he was quite proud of his fort (12).” Later, the fort was easily surrounded and he was forced to surrender. Obviously, by 1776 at Princeton, Washington had learned through experience to weigh all possible advice before making military decisions (just as he had also learned that a feasible route of retreat was imperative when facing a superior force).

Washington’s natural physical bravery also evolved into a deeper courage when he transformed his early adrenalin-fueled bravado into a firm emotional resolve that was able

to block out realistic fears of disastrous loss when he was undertaking pivotal military actions which carried a good chance of decisive success. The decision he made at Christmas 1776 to go on the attack, under fierce weather conditions and with a depleted, ill-clad force, against the Hessians at Trenton proved that he had developed the capability to ignore the real and fearful possibility of failure in pursuing a good chance of ultimate triumph.

In political decisions as well, Washington in his first Presidential term continued the practice of listening to input from all quarters. His initial cabinet was filled with talented and astute men, and Washington, realizing this, successfully played the role of listener and consensus-builder, in which he felt most comfortable. Later, as party animosities developed over the question of what should be the proper attributes of a Federal political system, and over appropriate national responses to the actions of the British and the French, Washington was forced by his political principles to choose the Federalist position and thus suffer the heated criticism of the Republicans. He rued this emergence of party antagonism, however, and warned against the dangers of excessive factionalism and regionalism throughout his presidency.

Public criticism of his military and (as above) his political decisions always produced a resentful sensitivity in Washington, as did any perception by him that he was being disrespected. Early in his career, in the 1750s, the tone of the heated plaintive missives from Washington to Virginia's Royal Governor Robert Dinwiddie and others concerning both the deficiencies of his military situation on the western frontier, first as a major and then later colonel in the Colonial militia, and his decided preference for being offered a Royal commission in the British Army, may ironically have been one of the

reasons he did not receive that commission. Later, during the Revolution, Alexander Hamilton gives a clear account of Washington's brief but vociferous displeasure when, at headquarters, the General felt that Hamilton, his younger subordinate officer, had rudely kept him in a prolonged wait on a staircase landing. On rare occasions as President Washington could also lose self-control during cabinet meetings. Thomas Jefferson gives a vivid description of such an outburst against some slanderous newspaper criticisms of Washington's motives and character.

Realizing the counterproductiveness of such explosions, Washington worked hard to master his temper during his years as military officer and political executive. His natural fierce reaction to perceived attacks undoubtedly continued to produce lots of internal heat, but the length and frequency of his external outbursts became less as his control over his inner "furies" grew.

Freeman thus is obviously correct: "The great fact is that Washington grew." How then does the study of Washington by teachers and students "show us", to repeat Gretel Ehrlich's words, "how to enlarge, deepen, and discipline ourselves"? One significant reply to this question, I believe, is that in examining Washington's life closely we grasp again the truth of the observation that character is revealed in action, and action arises out of character. Ultimately, a person is what he or she does. True character analysis does not distinguish between public behavior and private behavior; a person is what he or she does in all spheres of life.

One of my father's old humorous lines was that a person's front yard is his reputation and his back yard is his character. Washington knew this to be untrue – particularly, perhaps, for him, but also, ultimately, for us all. A good analogy may be

drawn with the landscape of Mt. Vernon, which had (and still has) no “front yard” or “back yard”. In fact, the original front door to Mt. Vernon looked East onto the Potomac River, but Washington in his lifetime reversed the front door to face West. Well-manicured grounds look out in both directions. Just as Mt. Vernon is fully landscaped back and front, Washington realized that his own personal public landscape was not going to be disjoined from his private landscape, either in the eyes of his own contemporaries or in the examination of future generations. All of his actions would be revealed for inspection, and thus his reputation for all time was going to rest on the totality of what he did, privately as well as publicly.

So perhaps Parson Weems had it right in his major contention about Washington, although not in his fatuous fabrications. A thorough study of Washington, private man and public man, reveals an honor-driven person who strove determinedly to transform himself into the heroic character he thoroughly wished to be in his own eyes as well as in the eyes of his contemporaries and future generations. His goal was admirable, and the fruits of his efforts are still being enjoyed by the citizens of the nation he helped found. In our own personal learning and growing, each of us might do well, in our lesser spheres, to look for ways in which we too can deepen and discipline ourselves.