

The Behavior Gap*

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“There’s so many people [who] don’t know what they want. And I think in this world that’s the only thing you need to know, is what you want.” Agnes Martin

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“What do you want, anyway?” she blurted. “I mean, you’ve had your hair long, you’ve had your hair short, you’ve been married, you’ve been divorced – what do you want? No, I really wanna know. You tell me what. Do you. Want.”

She actually didn’t look that eager to find out. Slumped over my kitchen table, hair dangling in her face, it was as if some irate spirit had temporarily taken possession of her body just long enough for her to spit out the words, then vanished as quickly as they’d been uttered. An auto-exorcism.

"I mean, come awwn."

The fact that she was seated did not prevent her from teetering dangerously toward the floor. I was silent.

It was the end of a spectacular rant that had begun inside the bar on 2nd Avenue and continued all the way back to Chinatown. I’d struggled to keep her upright as we staggered down Chrystie, way too interested in what she had to say to think of hailing a cab. It was the first time I had actually heard anyone talk to me like that, and she seemed more than happy to give me an earful. It felt like a gift being bestowed on me.

But I was sober by now and remorse was creeping up on me, as if I was doing something horrible by keeping her here, so drunk and emptying the contents of her blacked-out mind, instead of sending her home. There was something sinister about it, an invasion of psychic privacy. And maybe this fear was heightened by the greater panic of my inability to process those words. But now the words had ceased and I was speechless anyway. It was time to call her a car.

After tucking her into the backseat of a black Lincoln and watching it pull away, I climbed back up the stairs to my kitchen. The spirit had coughed up the question, but its bodily messenger had departed, leaving me to answer it alone.

In that spirit a voice had materialized, a familiar voice that had hounded me since my earliest problems, taking on one human form or another: my fourth grade math

teacher, my senior studio advisor in undergrad, my mom on one very bad day. It was the voice of someone who could conquer problems expressing their bewilderment that I couldn't conquer mine. Sanity knocking on 5-inch soundproof glass, mutely trying to reason with me through the barrier, while from across the divide I smiled crazily or burst into tears, depending. Yes, my friend was wasted, but I was kind of nuts.

Nuts with fear - although if you were to look at my life you wouldn't have sensed any real danger. Insecurity isn't necessarily not having enough, it's also the fear that what you do have will be taken away. "Nobody's rooting for her," I remember being surprised to hear somebody say once about a gorgeous, hardworking young girl I knew. "Forget it. Who wants to see a smart, pretty girl succeed?" I realized I knew what they were talking about. How could she ever feel very bad, looking like that? And where does she get the money for those shoes?

Fear hides in the money-for-the-shoes part. How I have money for *my* shoes. I'm basically poor, I'd think proudly. I spend all my money on shoes. Because it's important to be tough. And to be tough is to be hopeless like that. Always shooting myself in the foot, and attracting things. Fashioning my little mask hoping to get some help and maybe notoriety. Hoping, hopeless. Not a mess, not pathetic, just, you know, hopeless. If you're going to be hopeless you might as well do it here, where chances seem good. Some glittering benefactor might scoop you up, or you'll acquire that notoriety you yearned for - the kind of buzz that exists just beneath the purview of professional party photographers and boutique fashion magazines. The kind that slips by you at parties, parks itself in a corner or against the wall or floats in a cluster of faces. A kind of queasy, doomed sort of notoriety.

I was hopeless. The gears seemed gummed up inside and it felt as if some incandescent repellent danced in my eyes with signs to keep out and beware. All over the city I watched other girls padding off to dates or jobs or parties. What did I "want"? I knew there'd been intentions - a studio, artworks, galleries and performances - but they had started to sound distant, like things I heard myself say to people I wasn't interested in getting to know. I didn't seem to have money left over for much besides a bedroom - forget art supplies or grad school. My bank account was leaking money that I should have had enough of because the things that seemed required to face my world were just so costly.

Work, commuting, weaving through the crowd at Whole Foods, laundry, dieting - I did them all with singleminded focus, determined to avoid free time.

I lit some sage and lay down on the floor, staring at the ceiling and holding the burning leaves above me. From the left I saw a flash of lightning through the dark

window. A distant rumble of thunder followed.

In the dim light of the kitchen I glimpsed a photo tacked on the wall. It was an aura portrait I'd had taken at the Feng Shui shop in the mini-mall below the Brooklyn Bridge. "Hmm," the woman behind the counter had said when she peeled the Polaroid open. "Very strong aura." I was surrounded by a red glow with bursts of yellow dancing over my head. "But," she said, "Darkness here." She gestured at my head and neck, frowning. "Thinking, thinking. Lots of thoughts, stress, all, all the time. You feel tired, worn out. Things actually are good—" she indicated streaks of green running up both my wrists "—money is good, lots will be coming in next few weeks. But you can't appreciate the good things that are around you. See this?" she pointed at the yellow. "Creativity. Many ideas. Opportunities in your career, connecting with many people. But you are lost in thoughts..."

**The Behavior Gap: Simple Ways to Stop Doing Dumb Things with Money* is a 2012 book by Certified Financial Planner, public speaker and New York Times contributor Carl Richards.