Two Versions of Me

Everybody has gifts, particular talents that enable one to easily perform tasks others find difficult. One of mine is spatial awareness. Given a just a few visual clues I can generally recognize where I am, both on city streets or in the woods. This skill is very useful, but can also be a liability.

Areas that seem familiar to me can generate false positives, I.e. I think I know where I am, but in fact I do not. Detecting this situation requires an admission that my superpower was wrong. Sometimes I stay stuck even when presented with evidence to the contrary, circling around the same incorrect train of thought, because I believe I should have been able to figure it out. This is especially true for areas near my home, where I will wrestle with the issue for longer than necessary. This is version one of me, in the default or lowest common denominator state.

Sometimes another version of me shows up. A long time ago I travelled around Europe with a backpack and a friend. One day we found ourselves in a train station in what was then Yugoslavia, with five minutes to make a connection. The schedule boards were written in the Cyrillic alphabet, which neither of us could read. We immediately began asking for help from anyone we could find. A local person quickly pointed us to the correct platform and we boarded the train. This is version two of me.

Both versions of me faced the same dilemma. Why are there two starkly different reactions?

One root cause is based on the type of problem I think I am dealing with. Simple tasks like reading a street sign or recalling a familiar trail fall squarely into the category of ‘I got this.’ Foreign language boards written in a non-Roman alphabet are at the other end of the spectrum, in the category of ‘get help fast.’ The gray area in between those two extremes is harder to classify.

I have learned that because I believe I am good at something, I will overestimate my abilities, causing me to get stuck on many challenges for which I should have asked for help. This is exactly my experience in the program. I languished for a year and a half in a dark place because I thought ‘I should be able to manage this.’ I had been good at managing my life up until this point, why would I need help now? However, my use of alcohol had long since moved into the category of the train station in Yugoslavia, yet I was still trying to figure it out by myself.

Thankfully, when the last of the illusions of control shattered on the rocks of addiction’s rocky shoreline, I did ask for help. Through the process of the steps the duality of situations like those above became more apparent. Every one of my abilities can be viewed as a coin, with one side depicting a gift, and the other a defect. If used improperly, my abilities at wayfinding can keep me lost. How then do I know the right way to approach a given situation?

The phrase “and the wisdom to know the difference” points the way. Version two of me accidentally got this right. They key difference between the two versions of me is the quality of willingness. Version two was willing to admit that he did not have all the answers, and that another could help.

Today I aspire to invoke that sense of willingness for any problem more complex than tying my shoes. I let go of my definition of the right outcome, and ask how to use the coin properly. The more open and willing my mind is, the more often I lay down the coin with the gift side up.

One of the character defects I deal with on a daily basis presents a concrete example, that of being judgmental. Beneath the defect is the generic ability to make a decision. This is clearly something I must be able to do for the rest of my life, it cannot be simply avoided. In that regard it is akin to our instincts, in that we must seek balance rather than avoidance. During my time in the rooms, I have listened to others describe how they deal with the choice. I have learned that when I apply judgment to people it is most often a defect. If I apply judgment to things, it can be an asset. This distinction sounds simplistic, yet I catch myself judging others daily. Upon realizing the mistake, I remind myself that I cannot evaluate where another person ‘should be’ on their own journey. I can only decide whether or not I want to emulate their behavior. This subtle distinction refocuses the evaluation on their actions (things) and not on the inherent worth of the person. In so doing I can invoke the better version of myself.