

'Say What You Mean' ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 So, one of the things that I really encourage people to do is train themselves to quote

00:00:12 say what you mean.

00:00:15 You know where I got this phrase from?

00:00:18 Say what you mean?

00:00:22 It's from literature actually, sort of classic in English literature.

00:00:31 It's by a book, it's, the author of the book is named Charles Dodson.

00:00:42 Doesn't ring a bell?

00:00:44 Well that was his real name.

00:00:46 His nom de plume was Lewis Carroll.

00:00:56 So Lewis Carroll is known as the writer of children's books and Charles Dodson is known

00:01:03 as the Victorian period mathematician.

00:01:08 There's even a theorem named after him.

00:01:11 Not a theorem but a mathematical process.

00:01:14 And in fact, uh oh, now I'm going to get on a geek out.

00:01:17 Okay, so I've got to rein myself in.

00:01:20 This is the problem, okay.

00:01:23 I just sort of, whatever comes up pours out.

00:01:29 So the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, it contains a pun that almost no one realizes.

00:01:41 A mathematical pun.

00:01:44 Tea was also a letter that was used as a variable, okay, in his day by people who were

00:02:00 insisting on the use of imaginary numbers and complex variables and things like that.

00:02:07 Dodson was actually a very old fashioned kind of mathematician.

00:02:11 He was more in the old fashioned Euclidean mathematics.

00:02:16 And he actually didn't like the new math, the new math of the Victorian period, which

00:02:23 probably seems like very old math.

00:02:25 But actually he was like wrong.

00:02:31 Complex variables turned out to be like this hugely, hugely useful thing, which I'll give

00:02:37 a whole Dharma talk on one of these days.

00:02:41 In any event, yeah, so the tea is a mathematical pun, the tea party.

00:02:48 Anyway at the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, there's a dialogue with Alice and the

Marsh Hare and

00:02:58 the Dormouse and the Mad Hatter, in which each of those people tell Alice in no uncertain

00:03:10 terms to mean what you say is completely different from saying what you mean.

00:03:18 The Mad Hatter says, said something like, you need to say what you mean.

00:03:23 Alice says, well I always mean what I say.

00:03:25 And then they get on this big riff about, hey, these aren't the same at all at all at

00:03:29 all.

00:03:30 To say what you mean means that you have an idea, and when it comes out in words, it's

00:03:38 accurate.

00:03:40 And it turns out that that's not such an easy thing to do.

00:03:47 It takes a lot of training, a lot of care.

00:03:54 We're not stupid, we know what we're saying, and in our mind it's evidence-based and logical,

00:04:02 but if you really listen to yourself saying it, okay, sometimes you're not really saying

00:04:10 what you mean.

00:04:11 What's in your mind is not what the words actually are.

00:04:15 So I've spent a long, long time trying to train myself to be careful about that, and

00:04:23 I'm a little bit, how shall I say, finicky, prissy, fussy about you folks learning how

00:04:36 to do the same thing, because I think it's extremely useful.

00:04:41 But it's also really hard, and the reason that I know it's hard is even though I work

00:04:51 at it and I'm pretty good at it, I'm amazed how many times I myself end up not really

00:04:59 quite accurately saying what I mean, which is, it happens, it's okay.

00:05:10 Every once in a while, in retrospect, I look back and I realize to my horror that I said

00:05:21 the opposite of what I meant, and that's like bad, which I did last night.

00:05:33 I don't know if you know what I'm talking about, maybe you can guess.

00:05:39 What I was trying to convey is that this path is available to the entire spectrum of culture

00:05:58 and philosophy and politics, and that conservative people, which I refer to as, quote, Republicans

00:06:07 and so forth, should be as comfortable within this setting as any other people.

00:06:18 I glory at the notion that that is the case, can be the case, but it came out

sounding

00:06:24 like I was sort of making fun of conservative and Republican people.

00:06:29 That is actually the way it came out, which was exactly the opposite of what I had in

00:06:34 my head.

00:06:35 So, bad, bad, bad, which someone pointed out to me, and I said, okay, when you're right,

00:06:43 you're right.

00:06:44 So, anyway, that's, I think, a really important point.

00:06:52 The types of people that in our culture would be called conservatives were the types of

00:07:02 people that in the context of Asia were my teachers, and they saved my soul.

00:07:11 So, anyway, just wanted to mention that.