

The Power of Stupidity



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Chapter 30 – Antidotes and Prevention

There is no definitive therapy for stupidity. It can't be totally defeated. But this doesn't mean that we must accept it. There are effective ways of limiting its power and reducing its consequences. Of course I am not trying to write a prescription or a "how to" manual – and it would be silly to think that all the ways of overcoming stupidity can be included in a few pages (or even in a whole book.)

But I think it's useful to look at some of the attitudes and resources that can help to prevent, avoid or correct the effects of stupid thinking, conventional prejudice or awkward behavior.

Stupidity, as we are discussing it in this book, isn't an illness. Unlike many medical treatments, remedies don't have to be boring or unpleasant. They need a dose of commitment and consistency, but quite often they are intriguing, interesting and fun.

Intelligence – what is it?

A strong antidote to stupidity is intelligence. This isn't as obvious as it sounds. It includes different meanings of the word. The more we have and understand information, experience and knowhow, the better we can prevent stupidity or reduce its effects. And this isn't only specific to what we are doing or to a particular environment. Facts, knowledge and insight that, at first glance, seem "unrelated" can be unexpectedly useful in all sorts of circumstances.

Restricted, confined intelligence lacks perspective.¹ We don't need to be Leonardo da Vinci to have an extended, cross-cultural perception and attitude. All we need is an insatiable desire to expand our knowledge beyond the limits of habit or culture, to understand what at the moment may appear to be irrelevant or uninteresting, but when combined with other things that we know, or can discover, will fit surprisingly into a new pattern – or reveal how a familiar perspective could work in a different context.

¹ An often quoted comment by Niels Bohr: «An expert is a man who has made all the mistakes which can be made in a very narrow field.»

Milan Kundera said: «*Stupidity comes from having an answer to everything. Wisdom comes from having a question for everything.*» We can never know where we can find an answer – even when we are not asking a question. The desire to understand, in its deepest and most intense quality, doesn't ask itself what it's trying to know. It seizes every opportunity to learn something new or different – or to correct some unfocused perception – or to understand better something that we already knew, but takes a new shape in a different perspective.

By doing so, we can spread little dots of light in the darkness, seeds in our reservoir of knowledge, experience and perceptions, without knowing how useful they will be until we unexpectedly discover where and how they will blossom. It can happen minutes or years later. In the meantime, the more tiny shiny dots we have, the more we improve the lighting in our mental environment. This hinders stupidity and helps intelligence.

Curiosity – about everything

It's pretty clear that a very effective antidote to stupidity is curiosity (as mentioned in chapter 13.) Of course there is a lot of gossipy, petty curiosity that doesn't widen our mind because it uselessly repeats irrelevant hearsay.

What makes us less stupid is genuine, keen curiosity, the instinctive and never fulfilled yearning for discovery, that knows how to find apparently small or irrelevant details, from which we can learn much more than is superficially obvious.

We can call it serendipity. Yes, it happens, it's often intriguing and it can be surprisingly useful. But it isn't good enough to stumble into learning. We can, and we should, deliberately seek what looks remote or unfamiliar – or maybe hides only a few steps away, around the corner from where we are usually looking.

Curiosity and listening (see pages 9 and 10 in this chapter) are probably the two strongest antidotes against stupidity. When combined, they are remarkably powerful.

Intuition – it doesn't just happen

Another effective antidote is intuition. It's mentioned in chapter 2 (also 16, 20, 24) and in the appendix about complexity – but it's worth repeating here that the most effective and enlightening paths are often those that may appear less logical.

Of course there can be no replacement for rational, disciplined thinking. But an intuitive spark can go a long way.

A frequently quoted comment is Thomas Edison's «*Genius is one percent inspiration, 99 percent perspiration.*» It can be read both ways. It takes a lot of work and patience to turn an intuition into organized thinking or practical results. On the other hand, an apparently sudden inspiration, when it's really meaningful, doesn't just pop up out of nowhere. It is the result of an extended build up of feeling, thinking, learning and caring – though we may be unaware of how this process has been naturally evolving inside us.²

While great intuitions are generally the achievement of particularly gifted people, we don't need to be a genius to have such a pleasant ability. In many situations a bright touch of sensitivity, small as it may seem, can be more effective than lots of planning or elaborate strategies to try to prevent an error or avoid a misunderstanding.

2 One could argue that small children can be remarkably intuitive, while they haven't had many years to develop experience. It's true. But adults don't realize, or don't remember, the enormous amount of intensive listening and learning that goes into being a child. And unfortunately a lot of what we are taught in later years works against spontaneity and intuition.

Creativity – an overused word, an unusual talent

This is one of the most misused words in today's vocabulary. So we'd better make sure that we know what we mean when we talk about creativity. At its best, it can lead to surprisingly effective and beautifully simple solutions. But it needs to be a genuine, unusual synthesis – not one of those repetitive mannerisms that are too often labeled “creative” though they have no such quality.³

This particular talent is a pretty rare gift. And, even when some genuinely “creative” people are involved, truly relevant solutions can't be found as often as it would be desirable. An occasionally enlightening change of perspective can be very useful. But we must count also on more humble, and much more consistent, behavior and attitudes if we want to make continuing progress in the daily strife against stupidity.

Meticulous – when and how

Fastidious, meticulous precision can be seen as the opposite of intuition, creativity and intelligence. Quite often it is (see chapter 12 on the stupidity of bureaucracy.) But there are ways of being careful and precise in every detail that are essential for successful results and relevant understanding.

The greatest works of art can give us an instant, spontaneous emotion. But when we understand how they were produced we realize that it took a great deal of meticulous care. There is no art without precise craft.

We are right when we get bored with zealots (see chapter 29) fussing uselessly about irrelevant details. But exacting care, painstaking as it can be, is a resource of intelligence and an essential tool against stupidity.

There are many examples of how the most brilliant idea or the brightest project can fail because a small detail is overlooked. On the other hand, all the history of human development shows how tiny perceptions can lead to great discoveries, depth of understanding or big steps ahead in knowledge. It can be difficult to understand which small piece of a puzzle is the key to the solution. But with disciplined practice, well trained intuition, and lots of curiosity, that can become a useful, and pleasantly enlightening, habit.

Experience – learning how to use it

A common cause of stupidity is not learning well enough from experience. We all have, to some extent, this problem. Even when we don't forget (we often do) we are rarely as good as we could be in understanding what we had an opportunity to learn from past mishaps or achievements. See some comments on this subject in chapters 2 and 29.

We would be considerably less stupid if we spent a little more time understanding what we can learn from results of what we have been doing. From failure as well as success, from unpleasant and embarrassing experiences or those that were enjoyable and amusing.

³ It's a stupidly widespread habit to use words such as “creativity” or “creative” for tasks and roles that have little, if anything, to do with those rare points of discontinuity that change patterns and perceptions and really “create” something new – or a new way of understanding things by seeing them in a different perspective. With this confusing terminology it's hard to tell, or to explain, what real creativity is. But it does exist – and when it happens it does make a real difference. Being involved in such a special event (that nearly always finds a simple answer to what appeared to be a difficult or impossible question) in an intensely pleasant emotion. While it can appear to be the achievement of a single person, it is rarely so. Most breakthrough intuitions and inventions are the result of gradual and extended cultural evolution, as well as a favorable environment. They aren't always recognized at the time of their birth. They can be opposed by a conservative establishment. Some are forgotten and have to be re-invented, years or centuries later.

We are also, too often, inadequate in learning from other people's experience. It isn't enough to admire or applaud, to criticize or despise. We can learn a lot from those who are more competent than we are, in any wide or narrow field. But it can be equally educational to observe the errors, that we often see, but rarely we analyze as carefully as we should to understand what they can teach us.

A not too superficial analysis of all sorts of episodes, large or small, recent or old, close or remote, can show which human behaviors increase the power of stupidity – and which (more rarely) help to reduce it.

We can also construct experience fields, as learning tools. Continuing experimentation isn't only a need in scientific method. Testing can be done by organizations in an organized scale – or by any one of us in many small ways, whenever we have an opportunity. Everything in life can be a laboratory (on trial-and-error see “Einstein and the ameba” in chapter 29.)

There are infinite situations in which we can test our way of thinking, of being, of behaving. When they “happen”, let's seize the opportunity to learn in a “low risk” environment what can be useful in facing more taxing tasks. And, when they are not offered by chance, it isn't difficult to make them happen. Maybe as a joke or a game. Not only in childhood, playing is a jolly good learning tool.

Experience doesn't grow automatically with age. Some people live long lives without ever learning anything, other than a few stereotypes rooted their shallow education. Learning is an active attitude, a never-ending task. And curiosity helps. Quite often, while we are trying to understand something in one field, we can discover an interesting lesson that applies to something quite different.

History – too easily forgotten

Experience isn't only what we learn in our lifetime. We are lucky to have a large reservoir. It's called history. And it goes back to long before there was written history, further enhanced by the growing discoveries of anthropology and our increasing understanding of evolution.

It's distressing to realize how poorly we are using those resources. As Aldous Huxley said: «*That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons of history.*» And he added: «*The charm of history and its enigmatic lesson consist in the fact that, from age to age, nothing changes and yet everything is completely different.*»

This is a basic concept in understanding not only recent or remote history, but also daily news from different environments.

Things do change, sometimes more than is apparently obvious, often less. It can be surprisingly easy to learn from facts or stories that may seem unfamiliar, but grow from the unchanging roots of human nature. Not only in history, but also in everyday life, we never learn enough from experience.

Simplicity – wonderful, but not easy

There are four pages on this subject in chapter 20. ⁴ Let me just repeat here that true simplicity is a great achievement, but finding simple answers to complicated questions, or simple solutions to thorny problems, isn't easy. It takes a lot of effort, as well as strong intuition and imagination.

Real simplicity is very different from superficial banality. We are very lucky when we can actually find such a crucial step in understanding – or in making things happen much more effectively. It's also a wonderful, exciting experience. That we can truly, if we so choose, call “creative.”

Unfortunately, it doesn't happen very often. But even when we are not enjoying such delightful harmony, we should at least avoid the frequent risk of making simple things unnecessarily complicated.

Humor and irony – when they are the right sort

Stupidity is a serious problem, but humor and irony can be very useful. When they aren't superficial derision or mockery, stale mannerisms or banalities, but a genuine and sincere ability to laugh, or smile, about our weaknesses and mistakes.

A very stupid way of exorcising the embarrassment of stupidity is to poke fun at fools – always assuming that they are someone else, and often using that label to dispose of any disagreement or uncomfortable opinion.

It takes a totally different perspective to use irony, humor, amusement and laughter as effective tools against stupidity.

The war against stupidity isn't grim or fearsome. Insidious as it is, we can have fun in fighting it. The more stupid people are, the less they know how to laugh at themselves. We are right to be merry when we find our stupidity amusing. Because this means that we aren't completely stupid – and we are making a step forward in becoming even less so.

Doubt – always

An intelligent and indispensable tool is doubt. In life we need to act and decide – and we don't always have the time to think. But this doesn't mean that we can rest on false certainties. Without falling into the anguish of hesitation and insecurity, we must learn to live serenely with doubt – as a constant scrutiny of everything we think and do.

Doubt is the source of philosophy and science. The widely quoted comment «*Cogito ergo sum*» isn't where René Descartes started. A slightly more relevant quotation (though it isn't exactly the way he wrote it) is «*I doubt, therefore I think, I think, therefore I am.*» If we aren't thinking, we don't know anything – and we can't be even sure that we exist. If we aren't doubting, we aren't really thinking.

Even Dante Alighieri, though his philosophy was rather dogmatic, wrote: «*Doubting charms me not less than knowledge.*»⁵

But it isn't only in the beginning. When one doubt is solved (or at least we have identified a manageable assumption, or a thinking process, that allows us to move further) there will be more along the road, at all stages of development.

If we believe that there are no doubts, the problem is that we can't see them. And that is very dangerous.

Where there is no doubt, there is no thinking. Where certainty prevails, there is dogmatism and ignorance. When perceptions never change, there is no progress – actually it's even worse than that, because as things evolve ahead of us we are left back in the darkness of ignorance and prejudice.

So let's be fond of doubt. Not just learn to live with it, but enjoy it a stimulating source of improvement and discovery. Life would be quite boring if we didn't have a chance to learn something new every day. If we have no doubts, we don't.

Learning from mistakes – deliberately

The use of error as a method is explained in chapter 29 – where we also discussed the usefulness of analyzing mistakes after they have happened. Some call it *post mortem*. But it isn't an autopsy. If the mistake didn't kill us, even if that particular project or action failed we are here to learn from it and do better the next time.

It's useful also to check in hindsight what happened in successful circumstances. Nothing is ever perfect, there is always room for improvement even in the best experiences – if only finding shortcuts that can lead to good results in a shorter time and with less effort.

There are analyses that can be performed only when a cycle is completed and we can examine, coldly and severely, the result of what was much more difficult to understand before or during its development. The outcome may be positive, or negative, or somewhere in between, but it's very likely that it isn't the same as, in the beginning, we expected or we had set as our objective.

It's unrealistic to hope that we shall never make the same mistake twice. But it isn't enough to know that “to err is human” and just move on to the next opportunity for error. Mistakes are a source of learning that it would be stupid to waste.

It also happens that mistakes lead to unexpected success. But it isn't enough to just be lucky. There is a lot that we can learn by understanding how “chance” may be pointing to an unexplored direction. As in an oversimplified, but I hope clear, example at the end of the appendix on chaos and complexity.⁶

Is stupidity a scar?

On how stupidity relates to fear, as we discussed in chapter 14, there is an interesting hypothesis: that fear may be the source of stupidity – in the general evolution of life as well as in human behavior, in the initial stages of learning as in the development of culture. It's explained by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *The Genesis of Stupidity* at the end of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁷

They observe that intelligence develops in relation to curiosity, as the ability to explore and understand. «*The true symbol of intelligence is the snail's horn with which it feels and smells its way. The horn recoils instantly before an obstacle, seeking asylum in the protective shell and again becoming one with the whole. Only tentatively does it re-emerge to assert its independence. If the danger is still present it vanishes once more, now hesitating longer before renewing the attempt.*»

In other words, the origin of intelligence is curiosity, but curiosity is timid. The antenna of knowledge withdraws when it meets an obstacle – or if it's scared. «*In its early stages the life of the mind is infinitely fragile. The snail's senses depend on its muscles, and muscles become feebler with every hindrance to their play. Physical injury cripples the body, fear the mind. At the start the two are inseparable.*»

Therefore curiosity is a risk – and risk causes fear. But without overtaking that fear there can be no development of intelligence. The temptation is to withdraw, to seek refuge in the shell, to abandon every attempt of learning – and so to degrade into increasingly torpid and demeaning stupidity.

⁶ It's also online gandalf.it/stupid/chaos.htm

⁷ *Dialektik der Aufklärung* was written during World War Two and was published in 1947.

I am quoting from the English edition, Verso Classics, 1997, translation by John Cummings, pages 256-258.

«Stupidity» – said Horkheimer and Adorno – «is a scar. It can stem from one of many activities – physical or mental – or from all. Every partial stupidity of a man denotes a spot where the play of stirring muscles was thwarted instead of encouraged. In the presence of the obstacle the futile repetition of disorganized, groping attempts is set in motion.» Curiosity dies out, experience becomes repetitive. “Partial” stupidity becomes general obtuseness.

«An imperceptible scar; a tiny calloused area of insensitivity, is apt to form at the spot where the urge was stifled. Such scars lead to deformities. They can build hard and able characters; they can breed stupidity – as a symptom of pathological deficiency, of blindness and impotency, if they are quiescent; in the form of malice, spite, and fanaticism, if they produce a cancer within. The coercion suffered turns good will into bad. And not only tabooed questioning but forbidden mimicry, forbidden tears, and forbidden rashness in play can leave such scars.»

The stupidity of power, because of fear and deliberately inflicted ignorance, can cause the stupidity of the powerless. The victims are scared and obnubilated into becoming unaware accomplices of the persecutors.

There can be many different ways of stupidity being caused by the inability or unwillingness to understand, to explore, to break out of the choking shell of mental idleness – that often becomes presumption of knowing, or sclerotizing prejudice.

A “callous area of insensitivity” is a source of stupidity. And that, in turn, can cause more callousness, cowardice, fear or selfish indifference – and so multiply stupid perceptions, attitudes and behavior. The discomfort of the original “tiny scar” leads to crippling rigidity, that can become aggressively arrogant, or nervously defensive, or blandly unaware. But, in any case, it’s dangerously stifling.

Uncomfortable – but exciting

Is understanding stupidity uncomfortable? Yes, it is. Especially when we aren’t familiar with the problem – or we are still in the early stages of trying to overcome the embarrassment (see chapter 28) and realizing how powerful a force we are facing.

Curiosity, the endless yearning for discovery and learning, the passion for understanding, is intriguing, amusing, exciting. But it isn’t easy – or comfortable. It can be pleasantly surprising or annoyingly disconcerting. It is quite stimulating to find new opportunities, but it’s disturbing to discover that we had wrong ideas or perceptions, to realize that we didn’t understand our mistakes and their consequences.

Knowledge can nurture hope, but in the process we need to face the fact that many things are ugly, difficult, unpleasant – or worse. This is why it’s easy to fall into the “fear of knowing” and seek refuge in the comfort of some false certainty.

This sad “wound” of experience, the fear of learning and exploring, isn’t the only origin of stupidity. But it’s one of the most worrying. And it’s a disease that tends to propagate.

When one of our antennae retracts – because of an injury or a scar – it happens that also other feelers suffer the same discomfort, the same laziness, the same atrophy.

Continued learning – while it’s a pleasant, often exciting, experience – can also be uncomfortable. And scary, because we don’t always like what we learn. But it’s necessary, if we don’t want to fall into the only alternative: increasing stupidity.

Commonplace and prejudice

Another problem is commonplace, as discussed in chapter 13. There are many things that “we think we know” but aren’t so. They can be inherited from long tradition or generated by recent misinformation. They can be whispered in petty hearsay or loudly proclaimed by mass media. There are always more than we think.

Some “false notions”, even if widely spread, can be relatively harmless. In the infinite multitude of gobbledygook, not all nonsense seriously damages our ability to understand.

It may not be necessary, when we are not studying history, to know that Nero didn’t burn down Rome. We can understand the metaphor of changing color even if we know that other animals, not chameleons, do so to blend with the environment. It’s pretty obvious (but how often do we stop for a minute to think?) that ostriches don’t bury their heads in the sand – and any imitation of that imaginary behavior is very stupid. But how many people (even when they know that it’s foolish) choose to pretend that they can’t see?

We can amuse ourselves with the anecdotic game of stereotypes, even when they don’t directly concern our life or our culture. But it’s more interesting (though it can be disconcerting) to understand problems in a wider perspective. This is often necessary, always useful, if we want to avoid falling continually into mistakes and misconceptions caused by all sorts of unfounded hearsay.

Of course not all commonplace (or common sense) is wrong. Some conventional wisdom, or traditional knowhow, is believable and useful. But it isn’t always easy to tell which. Like habits (chapter 15) also the things that “we think we know” or appear “usually” reasonable can give us a falsely comfortable feeling, the delusion that we have nothing to learn, the risk of not knowing (or forgetting) how to find more interesting thoughts, perspectives, resources and solutions.

More doubting

In addition to the general doubt that is a key tool for knowledge, we need more doubting in the pursuit of reducing stupidity. One of the basic notions in this book (as well as in any considerate analysis of the problem) is that the most foolish of all fools are those who believe that they know everything and never make mistakes.

We must consistently cast a shadow of doubt not only on prevailing prejudice, unfounded assumptions and general hearsay, but also (and above all) on our own opinions, especially when they seem certainties.

As Mark Twain said *«It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble, it’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.»*

When it’s time for action, doubts must be set aside – but not forgotten. If we don’t go on learning while we move, we can lose track of what we are trying to achieve.

How much of what “we think we know” is the result of inadequate information, or poor understanding, or some problem in our perception, or notions that we carry without knowing where they came from? Always more than we think, if we aren’t in the habit of doubting everything, for the sake of learning.

Doubt isn’t weakness or insecurity. Quite to the contrary, it’s a point of strength, when we know how to live with it as a resource.

There are people who can spend their entire lives being “certain” of lots of things that they don’t really understand. That is dangerous stupidity.

Is it difficult?

It isn't easy – or comfortable. Especially in the initial stages of understanding the treacherous nature of human stupidity. But it isn't as difficult as it may seem. Should it become hateful, obsessive diffidence? No. Doubting is a way of being and thinking, a resource for knowledge and understanding.

It doesn't mean that we should always mistrust everyone and everything – that's impossible, and uselessly unnerving.

To trust is necessary, in many circumstances, even when it's not unavoidable (as it is quite often, as we can't survive in any organized society without trusting people, that we don't even know, who are providing services and resources that are necessary for our well-being, even for our basic survival.)

But we need to know how to doubt – of other people's opinions as well as our own – if we want to continue learning.

Do we have the time?

Is it time consuming? Not always. In any case, the time spent knowing where we are going, and why, is much less than the time and effort needed to correct the results of stupid mistakes.

There are six pages in chapter 16 on the stupidity of haste. It's worth repeating here that, while avoiding the consequences of hasty blunders saves a lot of malaise and disappointment, understanding before rushing ahead is also an enlightening, encouraging, often amusing experience.

Generosity – not only unselfish

Being genuinely generous isn't only commendable behavior. It's pretty obvious that, by doing something good for someone else, we reduce the overall stupidity in the system. But it's also good for our personal advantage. A sympathetic, kind, humane attitude opens grounds of dialogue, cooperation and learning that are inaccessible to egocentrics and egoists.

This doesn't mean that we should expect gratitude or goodwill. It rarely happens. But mutual trust, when soundly based, is very valuable. Sincerely warm relationships are an enjoyable experience per se – and can build a pleasant and constructive environment where intelligence can thrive and there is less nourishment for stupidity.

Listening – first and foremost

There is a basic concept, that probably is the most important antidote to stupidity – and the greatest source of intelligence. It's called *listening*. A clear and simple word, that is worth some comment.

It's generally believed that a quality of intelligence is to be able to say – to explain, to make things clear. This is true, when it isn't just rhetoric or style, but genuine and effective communication, information, relevant comment and interpretation. But the finest art isn't speaking (or writing.) It's listening. As is quite clear to those who have a good understanding of communication.

Ernest Hemingway said: *«I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen.»*

A widespread form of stupidity is to be in love with one's voice. To speak for the sake of speaking, regardless of whether anyone else is interested in what we are saying – and without listening to what they may have to say. By doing so we aren't only awfully boring, and often going unheard. We also lose many opportunities to learn something.

The world is full of people who listen mostly to themselves. Usually, while they don't understand others, they also lack a clear perception of their own inflated ego. They spend all their life nurturing an imaginary "self", that they try to impose onto everyone else. The problem is that a bit too often they succeed, because it's part of human nature to be "followers" – to fall into step with whoever poses as a leader – and this enhances the stupidity of power, as we saw in chapter 10.

Such is the inability to listen that people can be close, even live together, for many years, without understanding each other or having any real communication. The often spoken or quoted phrase *«My wife (or my husband) doesn't understand me»* isn't only a conventional excuse for infidelity.

To listen isn't just a matter of hearing and understanding. It's putting oneself in someone else's shoes, seeing things from another person's point of view. Not just keeping our ears open, but paying attention beyond appearances, having genuine sympathy and really caring for what maybe someone isn't saying, but would like us to perceive. This isn't only about understanding other people. It's important also to know how to listen to ourselves. And to perceive the meaning of situations, environments and circumstances.

It was explained in an interesting way by Karl A. Menninger. *«Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand.»*

While other problems relating to stupidity are poorly studied and understood, the lack of listening is a syndrome that is widely and seriously discussed. There is an abundance of books and essays, also academic studies, on this subject – in addition to our dismay when we realize that we aren't being heard. But are we doing what we should to be understood? And why should other people listen to us if we aren't good enough in listening to them?

Of course this is about reading as much as it is about listening. Jorge Luis Borges said: *«One isn't what one is because of what one writes, but because of what one has read.»* And it's also about seeing. Too often we perceive what suits our habits and miss what could widen or improve our perspective – as explained in chapter 21.

It's worth listening to all sorts of different things – including those that, at first glance, may seem irrelevant. We can learn by understanding mistakes – or seeing through the silliness of pompous nonsense or apparently irrelevant banter. As Plutarch said, two thousand years ago: *«Know how to listen, and you will profit even from those who talk badly.»*

Of course not everything that we hear, read or see is worth knowing – or understanding in any depth. But it takes more than good hearing or keen sight to catch the interesting signals that can appear where and when we least expect them. It's worth repeating that insatiable, instinctive curiosity is a fundamental resource of intelligence.

Unpredictable – but awareness helps

One of the most dangerous facts about stupidity is that it's unpredictable. This is fairly well understood by common sense – and confirmed by any serious study of the subject.

But this is so only if we assume that human behavior (friend or foe, favorable or contrary) is always reasonable or coherent. That is to say, we underestimate the power of stupidity.

This isn't about "predicting the future." It's a matter of perceiving situations – and deducing possible consequences. When we learn to understand stupidity, we can also know how, when and where it's more likely to get into the act. Its ways of existing and causing damage have always been exasperatingly, monotonously repetitive since the origins of humankind.

In addition to a general understanding of stupidity, we can also have a specific perception of how it tends to surface in the behavior of a single person (including ourselves) or in a particular environment or situation. Stupidity is generally uneven. We are all more often stupid (or not) in some than in other ways.

If, instead of pretending that stupidity doesn't exist in our milieu, or believing that we are immune, we realize that it's everywhere, we discover that it's more predictable than we generally assume.

Depending on the circumstances, it can be more or less difficult to guess how stupidity will interfere. But we can be pretty sure that, in one way or another, it will happen. Probably "at the worst possible time" (Murphy's Law – chapter 4 – isn't just a funny joke.) By simply knowing how likely it is, we can avoid being taken too often by total surprise.

The Power of Passion

As we saw at the end of chapter 28, there is a strong emotion called passion. Unlike obsession or anxiety, it's a powerful, lively resource.

There are risks. We can make fools of ourselves when we are too easily carried away by enthusiasm. But it's much more stupid to be passive, indifferent, apathetic, careless or callous.

We can be genuinely passionate about great ideas or small hobbies, people we love or things we cherish, major tasks or apparently small details. On any scale, it's an essential way of being human. Pleasantly exciting and intensely motivating.

Let me add here that passion is a vital force, a leading drive behind the most successful and rewarding human achievements. It's a powerful antidote to boredom, depression, inertia – and stupidity. Like strong medicine, it can have "side effects." But we can't be really alive without it.

Yes, we can – with good humor

Disturbing as this may be, the first and crucial step is to understand that stupidity isn't a joke. It doesn't belong only in funny stories, entertainment, mockery or folklore fables. It's silly to believe that it's somewhere else, in an imaginary land of the fools, as separate from the world we live in. But it's a widespread habit to stay away from the problem – and so avoid the embarrassment.

If we know how to listen, we can learn many interesting things. It helps us also to catch the early signs of stupidity symptoms – and so avoid its worst consequences.

The more we know how to understand stupidity, the better we can reduce its power. We can't defeat it completely, but there is a lot that we can do to reduce the discomfort and the danger of living with this basic characteristic of human nature.

Sometimes it's fun, sometimes it isn't, but learning to be less stupid is a jolly good reason for good humor.