

Thinking, Feeling, Believing

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The philosopher Martha Nussbaum thinks (I think she thinks) that what we believe we think is really a combination of what we think and what we feel. For me this is not just a question of word choice, it's a question of how we writers present our characters and even ourselves as we write.

To get into the way-back machine: Nussbaum would say that beginning with the thinkers of Classical Greece we've done our best to distinguish between thought and feeling, and she might go so far as to say that for those Greeks (particularly the Stoics) it was important to keep feeling from polluting thought.

I have imagined I've always been very careful in using these two verbs "think" and "feel" because, good occidental boy, I, too, must have had it driven into my brain this same idea: thoughts are distinct from feelings. Thoughts come out of our rational brains and feelings come out of surges of hormones. And feelings, then, may not be trusted, may simply be passing, and cannot be rationally expressed.

The distinction between thought and feeling fits nicely into Christian thought where our emotions are seen as always getting us into trouble. Emotions need to be governed. And there's a little Freudian theory going on here, too, our super egos (reason) riding herd on our ids (ungoverned emotion).

What if that's all wrong? What if our thoughts are, in fact, always being informed by our feelings? If that's the case, we people aren't really rational as we'd like to think we are. Instead we're simply using our brains to rationalize, building constructs that justify the directions our emotions drag us toward.

I went back to some of my older fiction to see how I'd handled the difference between thought and feeling in my writing, believing I'd made a sharp distinction between the two. But you know what? I hadn't. My characters lived in a swamp of emotion that seemed to drive whatever thoughts they had. Those same emotions seemed to govern what they believed (or at least what they thought they believed).

OK. So what? That's only fiction. I made it up, and I often made my characters hapless souls with limited psychological resources. But Frank the essayist, writing about his own thoughts and feelings is at best the same messy swamp of emotion-driven thought and belief.

The thoughts we have that are utterly free of emotion must be rare. If I'm doing a simple math problem—even long division—I may have no emotional investment in the result. It's just a number. But if I'm balancing my checkbook to see if I have enough funds to cover my credit card bill due these next couple of days, everything

is different. I can feel the panic welling up as the numbers fall into place. Even subtraction has an emotional force that must be accounted for.

This would be a good time for you, fellow writer, to pull out a story or an essay you've written and walk your way through the verbs that drive the inner lives of your characters in fiction and of yourself in your nonfiction world.

I have to admit I think Martha Nussbaum is right: Our thoughts and our feelings are forever entangled. Now, we might ask ourselves what we're supposed to do about it. We could do as we've been trying to do for the last 2,500 years or so, try to push emotion out of our thoughts. Or we could just give a shrug and roll with what we've got, with what we human animals are.

And that is the start of a harder question for us all: Is literature a mirror of our shared lives or can it be a lamp showing us a better way to be? A way, perhaps, that we might think our way to better selves. The literary critic M.H. Abrams wrote a whole book on our literary history surrounding this question. But the question remains far from settled.

I admit I've always been resistant to the literature of "should," have resisted didacticism at every turn. In doing so, I have imagined (maybe even believed) that by showing the behavior of various characters, of exploring my own behavior that lessons would bob up to the surface for any thoughtful reader to grab hold of and judge for herself.

I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. That's almost become my mantra as a writer, and at the heart of the not-knowing is this vague need to reckon with thought, feeling and whatever beliefs may result.