

Diagnosing and Treating the Ophelia Syndrome

by Thomas G. Plummer



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In *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3, Laertes warns his sister, Ophelia, to avoid falling in love with Hamlet, whose advances, he claims, are prompted by fleeting, youthful lust. He cautions her against Hamlet's "unmastered importunity" and counsels her that "best safety lies in fear."¹ Then her father, Polonius, begins to meddle. He knows, he tells Ophelia, that she has responded to Hamlet's attention and then informs her that she "does not understand [herself] so clearly." He asks if she believes Hamlet's affections are genuine, to which Ophelia responds, "I do not know, my lord, what I should think." Polonius answers, "I'll teach you. Think yourself a baby"

In this scene Shakespeare has given us the essence of what I call the "Ophelia Syndrome." It requires two players, a Polonius and an Ophelia. It is condensed into these two lines: "I do not know, my lord, what I should think," and, "I'll teach you. Think yourself a baby." Ophelia does not know what she should think, and Polonius, reducing her to the stature of a baby, presumes to tell her. Polonius pontificates. He purports to know answers when he has none. He claims to have truth when he himself obscures it. He feigns expertise by virtue of his authority. But his real interest is power: he clamors to be a parent to other adults and exhorts them to become children to his word. Ophelia is worse than naive. She is chronically ignorant, chronically dependent, and chronically submissive. She is an adult who chooses to be a baby, one who does not know her own opinions and who would not express them to an authority if she did.

S.I. Hayakawa describes symptoms of the Ophelia Syndrome in his essay "What Does It Mean to Be Creative?":

Most people don't know the answer to the question, "How are you? How do you feel?" The reason why they don't know is that they are so busy feeling what they are supposed to feel, thinking what they are supposed to think, that they never get down to examining their own

deepest feelings. “How did you like the play?” “Oh, it was a fine play. It was well reviewed in the New Yorker.” With authority figures like drama critics and book reviewers and teachers and professors telling us what to think and how to feel, many of us are busy playing roles, fulfilling other people’s expectations. As Republicans, we think what other Republicans think. As Catholics, we think what other Catholics think. And so on. Not many of us ask ourselves, “How do I feel? What do I think?”—and wait for an answer.²

Charles Schultz characterized the Ophelia Syndrome more succinctly in this *Peanuts* cartoon:



Psychologist Carl Jung describes this dependence on others for one’s thoughts in the context of his discussion of “individuation.”³ Individuation is the process of learning to differentiate oneself from others. It is a psychological “growing up.” It means to discover those aspects of the self that distinguish one person from another. Failure to achieve individuation leaves people dependent on other, stronger personalities for their identity. They fail to understand their uniqueness.⁴

I have a friend who is fond of saying, “If we both think the same way, one of us is unnecessary.” The clone, the chameleon personality is the Ophelia Syndrome in another form. One reading of Ophelia’s suicide later in *Hamlet* suggests that because she has no thoughts of her own, because she has listened only to the contradictory voices of the men around her—Laertes, Polonius, and Hamlet—she reaches a breaking point. They have all used her: “She is only valued for the roles that further other people’s plots. Treated as a helpless child, she finally becomes one . . .”⁵ Her childishness is just a step along the regression to suicide, a natural—if not logical—solution to her dependence on conflicting authorities.

The Ophelia Syndrome manifests itself in universities. The Ophelia (substitute a male name if you choose) writes copious notes in every class and memorizes them for examinations.⁶ The Polonius writes examination questions that address just what was covered in the textbook or lectures. The Ophelia wants to know exactly what the topic for a paper should be. The Polonius prescribes it. The Ophelia wants to be a parrot, because it feels safe. The Polonius enjoys making parrot cages. In the end, the Ophelia becomes the clone of the Polonius, and one of them is unnecessary. I worry often that universities may be rendering their most serious students, those who have been “good” all their lives, vulnerable to the Ophelia Syndrome rather than motivating them to individuation.

And so what? Is it such a bad thing to emulate teachers? What if you are a student of biochemistry or German grammar? Then you have to memorize information and take notes from

instructors who know more, because the basic material is factual. There is no other way. And this is a temporary condition of many areas of study. But eventually every discipline enters into the unknown, the uncertain, the theoretical, the hypothetical, where teachers can no longer tell students with certainty what they should think. It is only an illusion, a wish of the Ophelias and the Poloniuses that literary texts have just one interpretation or that the exact sciences be exact. At its best, even science is a creative art. Hayakawa quotes his good friend Alfred Korzybski as saying,

*Creative scientists know very well from observation of themselves that all creative work starts as a feeling, inclination, suspicion, intuition, hunch, or some other nonverbal affective state, which only at a later date, after a sort of nursing, takes the shape of verbal expression worked out later in a rationalized, coherent . . . theory.*⁷

Most of us have metaphors—either subconsciously or consciously—of our student experience. I asked several of my students about theirs. One said he thinks of himself as a computer with insufficient memory. He is able to enter information but cannot recall it. One said he is a sieve. A lot of stuff goes right on through, but important pieces stay lodged. One said she feels like a pedestrian in front of a steamroller, and the driver will not give her any hints about how to get out of the way. Another described his metaphor as a tennis match in which he must anticipate his instructor’s response to each shot. Another thought of herself as a dog jumping through a hoop. Another described himself as a mouse in a maze with no directional signs and no exits. Another as a child in a candy store where you can choose only one or two pieces to take home. These metaphors describe people at various stages along the way from Ophelia to individuation.

Talk is cheap. It’s fine to say, “Learn to think for yourself,” and it’s quite another to do it. A recent *Fortune* magazine article described the plight of middle managers in American corporations. Driven by chief executive officers at the top for greater profits and productivity, many are working 70 or 80 hours a week and sometimes more. The article reports that the corporate byword for urging these people on is “think smarter.” But since no one really knows what that means or how to think smarter, they just work longer. And people are burning out.⁸

Learning to think while still in college has its advantages. It may mean shorter working hours later on. It may mean not having a mid-life crisis because you chose to study what you wanted rather than something that someone else wanted you to study. It may mean becoming your own person. It may, purely and simply, mean a much happier life. I want to suggest six things you can do—six things I wish I had done—to treat the Ophelia Syndrome.

Treatment 1

Seek Out and Learn from Great Teachers, Regardless of What They Teach.

How do you find them? First of all, they have a reputation among students. They are known to set people on fire, to inspire them. They are known to be challenging, fair, and tough. They refuse to be a Polonius, they refuse to make you a baby, and they refuse to do your thinking for you. They join you as a partner in a learning and research enterprise. I recently heard a nationally televised interview with violinist Itzhak Perlman and his teacher, Dorothy Delay, at Julliard School of Music. Perlman, now 45, was sent to Julliard as a gifted child prodigy. He was angry to

have been sent to New York, far from his friends and family in Israel, and he was furious to live in the Julliard student hotel, an environment that he considered unseemly.

The interviewer asked him how he had liked his teacher.

“I hated her,” he replied.

Ms. Delay, a gentle woman with an air of complete calm, smiled into the camera. “I hated her,” he repeated.

“Why?” the interviewer asked.

“She would never tell me what to do,” said Perlman. “She would stop me in the middle of a scale and say, ‘Now Itzhak, what is your concept of a C-sharp?’ It made me furious. She refused to tell me what to do. “But,” he went on, “I began to think as I played. My playing became an engaging intellectual exercise in which I understood every note and why I played it the way I did, because I had thought about it myself.”

In that same spirit, Wayne Booth in his book, *The Vocation of a Teacher*, asserts that regardless of whether a teacher lectures or runs discussions, the “teacher has failed if students leave the classroom assuming that the task of thinking through to the next step lies entirely with the teacher.”⁹ To this point, Booth adds three more principles that will help teachers and students avoid the Polonius role. Addressing instructors, he writes:

1. *You gotta get them talking to each other, not just to you or to the air.*
2. *You gotta get them talking about the subject, not just having a bull session in which nobody really listens to anybody else. This means insisting on at least the following rule in every discussion: Whether I call on you or you speak up spontaneously, please address the previous speaker, or give a reason for changing the subject.*
3. *You gotta find ways to prevent yourself from relapsing into a badly prepared lecturette, disguised as a discussion. Informal lectures are usually worse than prepared ones.¹⁰*

Treatment 2¹¹

Dare to Know and Trust Yourself

Perhaps it goes without saying that you cannot know what to think if you do not know who you are. People go about self-discovery in various ways, and I can only share my own experience. I did not begin a truly honest search for my “self” until I was 40 years old. Then it became an obsession. I took personality tests. I re-read old letters I had written and received. I began keeping a journal. I wish I had done it all 20 years before.

I now keep track of myself and my thinking through writing. I write letters and keep copies of what I write. I have had two sons on missions, and I make sure that I say things to them not only that I want to say but also that I want to remember. Second, I keep a journal—sporadically but frequently. I never take more than five or ten minutes to write in it, and when I write, I write intensively. I write to find my own voice, my own thoughts. I do not worry about who may read it later. It is for me. I write about my subconscious as well as my conscious self, because I believe

that dreams do much of my thinking for me. Here is a dream from November 15, 1987:

Louise and I were driving through a sparsely populated, desolate area. The car engine faltered and quit. Luckily just across the road was a Chevron station. I knew the repair work was minor and pushed the car into the station. It was ready later in the day.

The service station attendant pushed a credit card bill toward me and said, "Sign here." I signed. "How much was the repair?" I asked.

"\$963." He replied.

"\$963? What cost \$963?" I was incredulous.

"Well, the repair work, and we put in a new dashboard."

"A new dashboard? How come a new dashboard?"

"The old one was scratched up." He replied.

"Why didn't you ask me before you did that?" I was now screaming. "I won't pay."

"You've signed the bill," he said. "You have to pay." His voice was gravely, firm.

He was right. I'd signed the bill. I had to pay.

"Just let me see the bill again," I asked. "I won't destroy it, I'm not a cheater."

Reluctantly, he let me take it. I could tell he didn't trust me. Other mechanics surrounded me and stared, sober faced, menacing. Heavy, burly faces. I looked at the bill. \$963. It would take months to pay off.

As I look back through this journal, I rediscover myself. There are notes about my son's crisis with his mission president, a painful chapter, and my efforts to play diplomat. There is a love note from my wife, notes on a line from Blake's poem, "London," reflections on a painting in our dining room, a list of highlights from 25 years of marriage, a greedy wish list for ourselves, plans for a trip to Tokyo, a red horse chestnut blossom from a BYU tree, and a poem in reference to William Carlos Williams:

*The chocolate hazelnut torte
At the Market Street Broiler
After a bowl of clam chowder
Makes more of a difference
Than that red wheelbarrow.*

There is a tribute to shrimp scampi, eaten at dinner at Sundance on May 5, 1989, with Elizabeth and Daryl Pederson:

*Hail shrimp scampi, a flourish
of trumpets!
Shrimp beats the hell out
of tea and crumpets!
Shrimp and pasta and garlic butter,
Divine crustaceans, you set
me aflutter.*

The point is this: As I write my life, I learn my thoughts, whether good or ill, conscious or subconscious. They are my thoughts, and as I come to recognize them I become less and less vulnerable to the Ophelia Syndrome through which others once dictated my life to me.

You can also increase your confidence in your own judgement if you take courses that teach you how to ask good questions, how to define the terms of your position, how to employ strategies of rhetoric and logical argumentation, and how to employ critical theory. Such courses may be elementary philosophy classes, advanced literature classes, or math classes. One of my colleagues once quipped, “If a course isn’t about method, it isn’t about much of anything.” I believe that.

As you come to know yourself and gain confidence in critical skills, you must also learn to play your hunches, to follow your intuition through. You truly are the only one who knows what you think and feel, and you, consequently are the only one who knows what feelings and ideas you must follow through on.

Treatment 3

Learn to Live with Uncertainty

To put it differently, surrender the need for absolute truth. The English poet John Keats wrote a landmark letter to his brothers, George and Thomas Keats, on December 22, 1817. It has become known as the letter on “Negative Capability.” In part it reads,

. . . it struck me what quality went to form a Man [or Woman] of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

I do not want to do Keats an injustice by oversimplifying a magnificent statement, but I believe he is saying essentially this: The world is a complex place, and absolute truth is elusive, indeed: the greatness in Shakespeare may be attributed to the fact that he didn’t feel inclined to explain what he could not, but only to portray the human condition as he saw it.

This concept drives a stake into the heart of the notion that Polonius has the answers. Overcoming the Ophelia Syndrome, becoming an independent thinker, includes giving up romantic notions of the world as a place where everything can be explained. It includes giving up the need to be fooled into thinking that Polonius does indeed have the answers when he does not. I wish he did. I wish I did. I wish any or all of my colleagues did. We do not. We can only join with students and others in the pursuit of answers, and even then we must remain ultimately in some degree of uncertainty.

The corollary to this is that to treat the Ophelia Syndrome, one must develop a healthy distrust of authorities and experts. Experts disagree more often than they agree. Those who pose as authorities are as likely to be a Polonius trying to turn Ophelia into a baby as they are to have a real handle on what they are talking about. Is there a solution? I can think of two: First, for every important opinion you hear, get a second opinion. Second, in the words of the Lord in the 9th section of the Doctrine and Covenants, study it out in your own heart.

When I was in graduate school, I took a seminar on Heinrich von Kleist from Bernhard Blume, one of the grand old men of German scholarship. One day we were to discuss a paper by a classmate, Ken Tigar, on Kleist’s play, *Der zerbrochene Krug*. The paper seemed sound enough to the rest of us. Tigar’s argument was based on a description written by professor Walter Muschg, the great Kleist scholar at the University of Basel, of a plate with figures engraved on it.

Professor Blume came to class with a large volume under his arm. He opened it to a picture of the plate that Muschg had described and passed it around.

“Well,” he asked, “what do you see?”

No one saw anything.

“Does the woman look pregnant to you?” he asked.

Ken’s face blanched.

Professor Blume continued, “No. But Muschg says she is pregnant, and Mr. Tigar’s paper rests on that premise.”

Ken stammered, “I just thought Muschg would be right.”

Professor Blume shut the book and said, “Let that be a lesson to you. Never trust anyone. You must examine the source yourself.”

Treatment 4

Practice Dialectical Thinking

By dialectical thinking, I mean thinking in alternatives and, if possible, in opposites. If you hear one solution to a problem, look for an alternative solution. If you write a draft from one point of view, write a revision from another point of view. If you formulate an argument on a point, try to formulate a counterargument. I have one student who writes his journal entries in dialogues. The speakers argue with each other. He is thinking dialectically. If you see things from a male point of view, think about them from a female point of view for a change. Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg defines morality as the ability to see an issue from points of view other than just your own. He cites E.M. Forster’s observation that most of the trouble in the world is due to our “inability to imagine the innerness of other lives.”¹²

And this is where your peers come in. They represent alternative points of view. Their ideas are as important—if not more important—than your instructor’s. The most memorable hours of my graduate education were not spent in the classroom. Some were spent with classmates in the cafe across the street after class. That is where Vicki Rippere, my classmate from Barnard, introduced me to critical theory. Some were spent in the graduate students’ room on the third floor of Boylston Hall. That is where Bodo Reichenbach and Mark Lowry debated hotly for two hours about whether Faust was a moral man.

You may have to please Polonius by writing acceptable papers for him, but your peers will teach you how to escape his power as you wrestle with them.

Treatment 5

Foster Idle Thinking

I asked a friend of mine, a neurologist, how he thinks. He said, “If I have to tell a patient something hard, and I don’t know how to do it, I sit in my office and daydream or fantasize about something that has nothing to do with the problem. When I am through, I know what I have to say.” This is a strategy for thinking by disengaging with the subject.

My wife, a fiction writer, gets her best ideas by taking long, hot baths. She doesn't try to think in the tub. She just soaks. Ideas float in of their own volition. Other people may take hikes, play basketball, or ride bikes. Still others may read novels or magazines. Idle thinking frees the mind for creative ideas. Hayakawa suggests that the creative person "is able to entertain and play with ideas that the average person may regard as silly, mistaken, or downright dangerous."

One of my students asked me if I thought television was bad for the mind. He said his father was always arguing that students in his day did more thinking than students today. I may have answered unequivocally "yes" to that question ten years ago. Now I am not so sure. If television is a means of retreating totally from thinking, then of course it is bad. But it may be as entertaining and pleasant as a hike or a long bath. The answer is no longer so clear-cut for me.

Treatment 6

Plan to Step Out Of Bounds

By "out of bounds," I mean out of the limits that Polonius may have prescribed for you. Independent thinking means to question the presumed bounds of thinking, reading, writing, or learning in general. A colleague at BYU once told me that years ago as a student, in a moment of boredom and desperation, he wrote a final examination in the form of a rhymed poem. He got an "A."

My own best experience with this was two years ago. It was Saturday night, the last night of final examinations, 7 to 10pm. I dutifully carried prepared tests to my class on "Reader-Response Theory," a course for advanced undergraduate and graduate humanities students. As I walked through the door, Holly Lavenstein, a gutsy student now enrolled in a graduate program in filmmaking in Chicago, met me. She looked me straight in the eye and said, "We don't want to write an examination."

Now Holly didn't threaten me at all, but the better part of honesty told me that the written exam I had under my arm was an exercise in futility. The students had already written three papers, a weekly journal, and complete reading notes. What more did I need to grade them?

"Well, we have to have a final." I said. My voice lacked conviction.

Yes, but not that one," she replied, pointing to the stack I was cradling. "If you'll step out in the hall for five minutes, we'll give you an alternative proposal."

Obediently I stepped back into the hall of the Maeser Building and sat on the steps. There was a lot of talking going on behind the door, and I could tell the tone was earnest, the atmosphere heated. In about five minutes, Holly poked her head out and motioned me in.

"We want a group oral examination," she said.

"And how's that supposed to work?" I asked.

"You just sit and watch," she said, "and we'll talk about what we learned in the course. I will lead the discussion. You don't have to do anything."

"Okay," I said, "On two conditions: First, everyone has to talk; and, second, everyone gets the same grade as the lowest performer on the exam."

Those were two of the finest hours of my entire career. The conversation was lively and challenging. The class became united. People who hadn't said five words all semester were

talking like crazy. Of course the group would have killed them if they hadn't. They talked reasonably, they argued, they screamed and hollered at each other.

When three hours had passed, Holly turned to me and said, "Well, how did we do?"

"A!" I said, "The best 'A' I ever gave."

The point here, however, is not that grade. The point is that this class, as a group, realized that their learning experience was more important than the grade, and they were willing to put all of their grades on the line to prove it. Sometimes escaping the Ophelia Syndrome means taking that kind of risk.

Treating the Ophelia Syndrome has its price. Only you can decide whether taking control of your education, whether using college as a time to achieve individuation, is worth it:

- 1) It may take time. A student in my class said, "I don't have time to learn to think in college." He said it sincerely. I inferred from what he said that getting out of college on a fast track was important to him. He wanted to be shown the hoops and jump through them. One of the costs of thinking is time. It means enrolling in courses not relevant to your major or minor because you want to take some great teacher outside your field. Or it may mean investing more time in discussions with classmates than you want to spare. Thinking takes time.
- 2) It means tolerating confusion about insoluble problems rather than finding "safety" in the arms of a Polonius who offers you a security blanket.
- 3) It means possibly getting lower grades that you'd like while you take a challenging teacher or try something out of the ordinary on an assignment.
- 4) It may mean going against the advice of people you love. One student noted in my class that it was hard to grow up as a good child and then study something that worries or frightens your parents. At the end of Act 1, Scene 3, Ophelia submits to Polonius: "I shall obey, my lord."

To all of this I can only ask, which is the greater price to pay: "To think or not to think"?

Notes

1. I am indebted to Kimberly Halladay, a BYU student, whose paper "Ophelia Oppressed" (English 252, Spring 1990), led me to coin the term, the "Ophelia Syndrome." Dr. Clyde Parker and Dr. Jane Lawson introduced me to theories of cognitive development from which I distilled several ideas into the Ophelia Syndrome.
2. S. I. Hayakawa, "What Does It Mean to Be Creative?" *Through the Communication Barrier*, ed. Arthur Chandler (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 104-105.
3. Halladay's paper applies Jung's idea to Ophelia.
4. Carl G. Jung, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959). Discussed in Wilfred L. Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 2nd edition (New York: Harper & Row), 178-183.
5. David Leverenz, "The Woman in Hamlet: An Interpersonal View," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4 (1978): 302-303.
6. Erich Fromm, "Learning," *To Have or To Be* (New York: Harper & Row), 17-19.

7. Hayakawa, 105.
8. "Is Your Company Asking Too Much?" *Fortune*, March 12, 1990:39-46.
9. Wayne C. Booth, "What Little I Think I Know about Teaching," *The Vocation of a Teacher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 214.
10. Booth, 215.
11. I became familiar with the general idea of dialectical learning in an article by William G. Perry, Jr., "Cognitive and Ethical Growth: The Making of Meaning," *The Modern American College*, eds. Arthur W. Chickering et al (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981), 76-116.
12. Lawrence Kohlberg, "A Cognitive Developmental Approach to Moral Education." *Humanist* 32.6 (1972):15.