THE SEERS: The Mind of the Entrepreneur
(master 3.30.13)

Flipped Startup

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How To Use This Book

Effectual entrepreneurs operate from a different mindset than most people; they see through different eyes. This book is intended to shift your mindset so you might see through entrepreneurial eyes.

Shifting a mindset is a process, not an intellectual exercise. A dynamic process requires an engagement with the day-to-day experiences of life and, therefore, requires two universal and necessary tools:

1. A Reflective Practice. Processes of self-knowledge are tricky because you are both the subject of the study and the studier. You are attempting to raise your conscious awareness of patterns of thinking and acting. You are sitting on the mountain so you can't see it. *A reflective practice is necessary to see the mountain upon which you sit.* In The Artist's Way this practice was called morning pages. In some processes it is called journaling. In others it goes by the name of reflective writing or free writing. Whatever you wish to call it or however you want to do it, it is an essential tool in opening your eyes to existing patterns and entrenched beliefs. Reflective writing is the best way for you to talk to yourself, to get beyond the moat of what you think you know and discover the deeper story structure driving your actions.

2. Pattern Breaking. In order to release your grip on what you think you know, to shake up your comfort and control, you need to break habits and patterns and break them intentionally. And, it is better if you have fun doing it. This is the equivalent of the artist's date. Sometimes this is called stirring the pot, breaking habits, or giving your self a gift. Regardless of the name it is necessary to challenge your assumptions if you want to open your mind and your eyes to new ways of seeing. Breaking patterns will help surface essential bits to write about in your reflective practice. It's a feedback loop.

The form of your reflective practice and pattern breaking is less important than the *consistency* of doing it. Give yourself time to reflect every day so that you may uncover your daily patterns of thinking and seeing. Use the tools, devices, and practices introduced in the book to consciously break your patterns. See what happens. Write about it.

Through the story you will move through 9 Recognitions. Each Recognition is followed by 3 tasks:

1) A Study
2) An Action
3) An Exercise

The tasks will help you develop new patterns of thinking and seeing. To that end, you will also find within the narrative a few related practices. The practices are useful in preparing your mind for the flip to a new way of thinking. This process is like riding a bike: you can read about it and think that you know or you can get on, start pedaling and learn to ride. The practices and tasks will only help if you do them; they can't help if you don't engage with them. To reiterate: perspective shifts are not an intellectual exercise; they are dynamic processes. Shifts in perspective are intuitive, experiential *engagements* made conscious through action and reflection. Effectual entrepreneurs are like artists: engaged in dynamic, fluid creative practices. Get on the bike and ride. Challenge what you think you know. Open your eyes to possibilities. Allow yourself to make meaning of your experiences *after* you have them. It is, after all, how your brain works so you might as well begin by dropping the illusion that you know something before you encounter it – it's an important skill for an entrepreneur.

Finally, although this may seem counterintuitive, at the core, effectual entrepreneurs must master two skills:
1) Pattern Recognition
2) Metaphor

Serial entrepreneur, Ash Bhoopathy said it best: "The more you see, the more you see patterns." Mastering pattern recognition is about mastering seeing and vice versa. After you begin to see, the essential skill to grasp is to help others see differently. This is the province of metaphor. "Mastering metaphor," according to Ash, is this: "making the familiar strange and/or making the strange familiar." Can you imagine a more important capacity in the development, marketing, and sales of a product or service?

To support your progress toward mastery of metaphor and pattern recognition, an ancient tale is braided through this narrative.

To recap: the path to an entrepreneurial mindset is through the mastery of pattern recognition and metaphor. Mastery is made possible through two simple actions: intentional pattern breaking and a reflective practice. It's a feedback loop.

Forward

On a sunny spring day a year ago, I was one of the organizers for a joint academic, corporate, and government workshop at the University of Washington in Bothell focused on 21st century learning. Since most of the participants did not know each other, we wanted to spend the first morning in non-traditional "get to know you" exercises. One of the other organizers knew of David Robinson's facilitation work and suggested that David could run a couple of "kinesthetic" exercises. Little did I know at the time that I had found the future collaborator that I have looked for the past ten years.

David led us through what I've since learned is his "Angel and Devil" exercises to help us experience, through moving around the room in two different ways, what it means to "experience first and make meaning second." Most of my adult life I've reversed these steps and missed much of what happens around me. Over the last year, and intensely over the last four months while collaborating with David on this book, while teaching graduate students how to design a human centered venture and starting a new venture (Flipped Startup), I experienced first-hand the insights, energy and difference that *The Seer* made in my life.

From the single hour that David spent coaching human centered designers to prepare for their final product pitch, I experienced the best presentations students have ever done in my classes in twenty years. In a short time, David introduced the notion of story as a more powerful way to "bring an opportunity" to a customer or investor rather than our traditional problem/solution pitch. Watching the light bulbs go on as David shared the elegant story format of "yearning meets obstacle" was amazing to behold.

More recently, David and I tag teamed my entrepreneuring class to develop the mind of the entrepreneur. I provided the selected readings on effectual entrepreneuring from Saras Sarasvathy along with the lecture material. As part of developing the entrepreneurial mind, one of the key facets is the relationship of chaos and order. Too many designers and entrepreneurs think that their role is to see the customer chaos and create order and then they are done. They miss that customers in combination with the inexorable march of technology are constantly cycling between order and chaos.

As I worked through these concepts with the class in my left-brained way, it was clear to me that most of the class was not getting these core concepts. David and I switched places and he led the class through a diagram of chaos and order and the "angel devil" exercise followed by the triangle exercise. David engaged their kinesthetic senses to take the students quickly through the experience of chaos and order. With the experience, now embedded in each student, they were ready to make meaning. As evidenced by the in-class exercises the rest of the evening and several unsolicited emails the following day, the students got the fundamentals of the effectual entrepreneuring mindset.

Five weeks later, the students participated in a reflection exercise about the journey that we had been on for the previous eight weeks of class. One of the teams generated a surprisingly deep multi-layer visual representation of their journey.

The student team reflected:

> "What is in green is what we've learned this quarter. In red are the kinds of hassles we struggled with in class. In the middle is the essence of what we've learned this quarter. The 'Build and Learn' loop in the middle illustrates this cycle of having to build in order to learn something and in that build/learn process, it is not always clear what is chaos and what is order.

> "We really liked the 'Chaos and Order' loop that David Robinson introduced us to and how easy it is to focus on the Order and lose sight of how we need to keep coming back to the Chaos.

> "At some level, the green and red text boxes on the left and right sides of the diagram represent the duality between Chaos and Order. For example, the 'pressure to build the best thing possible' is balanced with the chaos of accepting that a 'good enough' prototype early as a minimum viable product will help us learn more from the customers."

The joy of seeing such an insightful diagram of the class learning process demonstrated to David and me that we were on the right track to quickly getting early stage

entrepreneurs to understand how to operate in this different world which is so different from their everyday large corporation experience.

As David and I continued our conversation, David realized that what he had learned in art school and throughout all of his work in the theater was the same core process as what I had learned in my forty years of entrepreneuring and intrapreneuring. However, we each had different words and language and ways of describing our essential processes and fundamental concepts. We laughed when we both realized that one of the primary resources that influenced both of us was *The Artist's Way at Work.* Even with all the wonderful exercises in this book, understanding the essence of this point of view often requires close collaboration with a master.

David Robinson is the Master of Seeing that I have sought for forty years. His way of seeing and his way of translating the knowledge of those of us hobbled with left-brain thinking is a delight to experience. More important, it is rewarding to incorporate David's Nine Recognitions of the Entrepreneur into my consulting practice of mentoring and teaching early stage entrepreneurs.

Enjoy the journey as this master executive coach shares what it means to "see" the path of the effectual entrepreneur.

Skip Walter
March 19, 2013

Prologue

This is a book about seeing.

Not many people see. Most people merely look. Just as most people hear but they do not listen, most people look but they do not see.

And, although this might not make sense yet, seeing has more to do with stories than it does with eyes. It works like this:

Everyone can see as a child. And then something happens. Children learn to name things with words. Then they learn to spell the words they use to name things. Soon they grow up and have a hard time seeing beyond their words. Often they name their experiences before they even have them. They do not see what is there, they see what they *think* is there.

It is a funny paradox about words - they can imprison your mind. Words can also set you free. It all depends upon how the words are used.

Entrepreneurs and artists share this trait: in order to master their craft they must learn to see again. And, in order to see, they must once again understand the power of their words; they must learn to see beyond their story. They must learn to flip their assumptions and let go of what they think they know.

Cycle One:

PATTERN

The First Recognition

1.

Some cultures actually believe that stories stalk you. They believe that a story is given to you before you are ready to hear it and then the story follows you throughout your life. Stories are patient and will stalk you for years. When it is first given, you miss the meaning of it or perhaps only understand the most superficial layer. So, like your shadow, the story walks with you waiting for the moment that you need it most. At that very moment, it penetrates your being. It becomes you. You become the story.

That is certainly true of the story of Parcival and me. When I was a kid I brought home a big picture book of mythology. In it was the story of Parcival. I loved it. It is a story of determination and passion. It is a story of ambition and service. I was captivated by Parcival's desire to make a better world for people. I loved his unwavering pursuit of his dream. I loved how different he was from all of the other knights. He made his own path. His path was entrepreneurial. I read every version of the story that I could find.

Like all the stories that wound up in the Round Table, I learned that Parcival's story is ancient, predating Christianity by hundreds of years. Parcival was the most unusual of King Arthur's knights. His story stalked me for years, so well in fact, that I didn't even know that it was following right behind me all through college, while I was creating my business and following my passions. And then, one day when everything collapsed, when my business tanked and my dream dissolved, when I needed the story the most, it stepped forward and took me. Since that day I have never seen the world or my work in the same way.

2.

He insisted that we work through online chat. No phone calls. No video. I thought it was odd but Virgil came highly recommended to me so I decided not to resist his preference. This was our first contact and I had just finished describing my business problems.

>   **Virgil:** You don't know what you don't know.

I stared at the screen and thought, "That's not very helpful."

I had contacted him because I was tired of failing. I felt stuck. I felt like I was working all the time and somehow always ended back in the same place: at zero and broke. I had good ideas, some great ideas for new products and services and yet I was once again at zero. My latest business collapsed just as the one before it. I was certain my latest venture was the one. I was certain. I brought my best game and still I failed. What was I doing wrong?

His next message popped onto the screen.

>   **Virgil:** You think as everyone thinks, that you simply need to change what you are doing and that will solve all of your problems. You think there is a prescription. That kind of thinking will only lead you back to zero.

I was getting frustrated. I was desperate. I needed to change. I needed to know what to do differently and I needed to know now. I needed to know! I've always known what to do but now I was lost. I was in no mood for mumbo-jumbo philosophy.

>   **Virgil**: From what you wrote, I see that you think you have a problem. The first recognition is simple: you do not have a problem. You have a pattern.

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. A pattern? That's it? That's the best this guy could offer me? Yes, I have a pattern. I have a pattern of failure and frustration. I knew that before I contacted him. And now I was so steeped in my pattern that I doubted everything I ever believed. I doubted myself.

>   **Virgil:** I can help you change your pattern. I have no time to waste with you if you insist on having a problem. Problem thinking will return you to zero again and again and again. In fact, your insistence on having a problem is part of your pattern. If you are not ready or willing to change your pattern it is better if we stop here. It is much better not to start until you are ready to challenge your assumptions and put down what you think you know of success and failure. Do you know the difference between a pattern and a problem?

I didn't know. And, frankly, I was having a hard time knowing why I should care. For a moment I thought about doing what I always do, pretending that I know the answer. I

was taught that "not knowing" is a sign of weakness. "Not knowing" meant I was bad at my work. My mentor taught me that I was supposed to know what to do. It's what made a good leader. It was the single-most important quality of a businessperson. Know what you are doing. But I was tired, scared and irritated so in defiance, as a challenge, I wrote the truth:

Me: No. I don't know the difference.

Virgil: Good. That is honest and your honesty is a great first step in establishing the new pattern. The old pattern says that you have to know the answer. It says that you have to know what you are doing before you act. It says you have to know where you are going before you take a step. Am I right?

I smelled a trap so I tapped slowly:

Me: Yes. Of course.

Virgil: Good. Then you will understand how important it is for you to take seriously the first step in creating a new pattern: From now on I want you to practice "not knowing."

"What!" I shouted at my screen. I smacked the keys:

Me: What? I don't understand!

Virgil: Precisely. Stop trying to understand. Stop investing in the safety of knowing. The truth is that you don't know. Isn't that what you wrote? You. Don't. Know. This is good news! Growth is never in the direction of knowing; it is a prerequisite of learning that you do not know. Let yourself learn. Stop protecting yourself from growth and step with honest intention into the truth: you do not know. So, practice the truth. Practice "not knowing."

I typed, "And just how in the hell do I do that?" But then I saw the trap and I erased it. Any "how" question was based on my need to know. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of catching me in his trick. So instead I typed:

Me: Okay. Great.

Virgil: Come back to me next week at this time. Through your practice of "not knowing," tell me what you discover about patterns and problems. What's the difference between a pattern and a problem? Why might it be an utter waste of time to think that you have a problem?

3.

I closed my laptop and took a walk. I always walk when I'm confused or frustrated or angry and at the moment I was all three of those things. How was I to practice "not knowing?" It seemed absurd! What did it matter if I saw things as problems and what was the big deal with patterns? I wanted answers to my questions. I wanted to know what to do! I wanted to know why my business failed…again.

As I walked I replayed the conversation I'd had at lunch the previous day. I had called my friend Elizabeth. A few years ago she was in the same place I am now: standing amidst the wreckage of her latest business. Like me, she had a long string of projects that *almost* made it. And then, something changed for her. She changed. She was now the CEO of a growing software company. She was very successful. At lunch I confessed my frustration and fear to her. "I need to do something different. Why can't I see what I'm doing wrong?" I nearly shouted.

Elizabeth smiled and folded her hands. "We've had this conversation before," she said. "A couple of times. Do you remember?"

"Yes." I grumbled, stabbing a chunk of potato salad.

"We can have this same conversation again in a few years if you want. Or, you can do what I suggested the last time we had it. Contact Virgil," she said, writing an email address on a slip of paper.

"Who is this guy?" I wanted to know why she was so insistent that I contact him.

"He can help you," she smirked, handing me the slip of paper. Then her expression changed. She got quiet for a moment and said simply, "He helped me. He can help you, too, if you are ready."

"What do you mean, 'if I'm ready?'" I sighed.

"Contact him and find out. Or, do what you always do and we can have lunch again in a year and have this same conversation over again. Are you frustrated enough to change what you are doing?"

I was frustrated enough to contact him. Virgil. And now, as I walked, I was more frustrated than I was before I contacted him. Practice "not knowing!" It made no sense. How was that bit of nonsense supposed to help me with my problem? Oh, right. I almost forgot. According to Virgil, I do not have a problem. I have a pattern. I kicked a pebble and watched it skitter across the street.

I replayed what he wrote:

> **Virgil:** I have no time to waste with you if you insist on having a problem. Problem thinking will return you to zero again and again and again…."

As I walked I wrestled with why I should care about the difference between problems and patterns. As if to spite this guy Virgil, I started to look for patterns just to prove that this exercise was pointless. To my surprise, I began seeing patterns everywhere. I noticed the patterns made by bricks in a wall. I saw patterns in the sidewalk. There were patterns in how people mowed their lawns. There was a pattern in my shirt and patterns in the clothes of almost everyone I passed. The trees on the street were planted in a pattern. The houses in my neighborhood were constructed according to a pattern. The more I looked, the more I saw that everything was part of a pattern. In looking for patterns I saw things I'd never seen before, even though I walked these streets everyday. I saw detail and color. More than once I stopped, surprised that I'd never seen this birdhouse or that cluster of flowers. Usually when I walked I was so deep in thought that I didn't see anything. I felt as if I was walking through my neighborhood for the first time. I was seeing it for the first time.

I heard Elizabeth's voice in my head, saying, "Contact Virgil. Or, we can have this conversation over again in a year."

I stood still. I looked all around me. Virgil had written:

> **Virgil:** Your insistence on having a problem is part of your pattern of failure.

Was I acting from a pattern that I could not see? Was I thinking in a pattern that I did not recognize?

I once read that the majority of what we think each day is the same stuff that we thought the day before. We are rolling the exact same thoughts through our heads each day, over and over and over. Only a few thoughts are truly new. What were the patterns of my thinking? What was I rolling through my head each day? Was I walking through my life as blind to my pattern as I was blind to my neighborhood?

It was true that looking for patterns was opening my eyes. I walked slower. This must be what Virgil meant by practicing "not knowing."

4.
When I returned home I found an envelope taped on my front door. Inside there was an index card with this quote:

"Thought is the sculptor who can create the person you want to be."
Henry David Thoreau

5.

It is probably poor form to start a story in the middle, in a moment of high crisis. When a story stalks you through your lifetime you inevitably learn some things about stories; you unwittingly stalk them, too. One of the first things I learned was that the word "beginning" is arbitrary. An end is always a beginning. A beginning is always an end. What we call a beginning or the middle or an end is really a simple matter of our point of view. It depends on what we see.

When I contacted Virgil, I was in crisis.

Another valuable thing I learned about stories is that they unfold according to established patterns. Beginning, middle, and end are a simple pattern. Within this simple pattern is a more complex pattern structure. For instance, in order to grow, the main character has to leave behind everything he knows and go on a journey. That journey can be literal or an inner, metaphoric journey. To leave behind "the known" is part of the pattern that leads to trials, confrontations, and catharsis. It's a pattern. Since each of us is the protagonist in our own story, the pattern is alive and at work in our lives. The trick is to become aware of where you are in the story cycle. Do you need to let go of what you know in order to grow? Are you navigating the trials? What happens once you've experienced catharsis?

Stories never begin with being found. We hear a call. We pursue it blindly and discover that we are lost in the woods. Stories begin when someone, the main character, you, gets lost or is knocked off balance.

This is how I discovered that I was lost in the woods. It went something like this:

I was an organizational consultant and a coach. I had a business partner, Tim, someone I trusted. I was the creative mind, I was the entrepreneur, the developer of the content and he did the administration and secured contracts. We had a small staff of trainers and facilitators. I was developing a line of products based on the research we had conducted with our clients. There was a book just waiting to be written.

I didn't pay attention to the details of our contracts or the nuts and bolts of our business. That was Tim's realm. Of course, I looked at our budgets, income and expenses, profit

and loss statements - and everything always looked in order. We met every week. We talked every day. I prided myself on knowing where we were, knowing where we were going, making sure we stayed on our path and our plan. I thought I knew.

And then one day I arrived at work and Tim had his head on his desk. He was clearly distressed. I asked if he was all right. He looked at me, shook his head. He sat back in his chair and said. "We're bankrupt."

At first it didn't register. "Very funny!" I laughed. He didn't laugh. He averted his eyes. After a moment I said, "But… That's not possible."

"We lost our major client. I thought I could get them back so I didn't tell you. They've cancelled the contract. Everything else is…the money's already been spent. Now, there's no more coming in. We don't have enough money for rent. We can't pay our phone bill."

"That's not possible," I repeated.

He simply said, "We have to let everyone go."

I remember standing very still, feeling sick to my stomach, not able to comprehend what he was telling me. The only thing I could say was, "It's not possible."

That's the exact moment that the Parcival story took me. It was a funny feeling to be standing there, lost, and to have this story wash into me. Parcival's story was my story and vice versa.

Tim saw it. He asked, "What just happened?" I waved off his question and retreated into my office, closed the door, and sat on the floor while the story that had stalked me all of my life took me and began to reveal its secrets.

You see, like me, Parcival was lost. Like me, he was trying to show off his success.

He had just officially become a knight! In truth, in his nature, he was actually more a fool, more a trickster than knight. But it was a knight he wanted to become and so it was a knight that he became!

After a very auspicious beginning in life, he had been discovered and trained by a master teacher. Now that he'd finally achieved his dream of being knighted, he was lost, riding through the woods, trying to find his way home. He wanted to go home and show his mother that he'd become something great!

Details are important in stories. They reveal pattern. They are very easy to miss and, once missed, the pattern remains invisible. It is an important detail to know that, at this

mid-point where we enter the story, Parcival didn't know his name. His mother had always called him "Dear Son;" she never spoke his name. Just like someone calling me an entrepreneur, or doctor, teacher, lawyer, manager, knight…. Parcival was a role. He had no father. He had no siblings. He had no friends. He'd grown up isolated deep in the woods. For all he knew, "Dear Son" was his name.

So he was lost. He was trying to find home. He had been riding for many days and was very tired. The sun was setting when he came upon a wide river and he recognized the place! "Home" was just on the other side of the river. There were no bridges and he knew he'd never be able to cross the river before nightfall. Just then, he spotted a small boat with two old men in it. One old man was fishing and the other guy, a really old guy, was just sitting in the boat. The fisherman saw Parcival and called out to him, saying, "If you seek a place to stay for the night, there is a lovely castle just up the road and you'd be most welcome." Parcival thought, Well, a hot bath, a good meal, and a soft bed to sleep in would be most welcome! He'd find a way to cross the river in the morning. That way, he would be clean and well rested when he arrived home.

Pay attention to this next part of the story. It's the part that washed over me when I stood looking at Tim saying over and over again, "That's not possible."

Parcival thanked the fisherman and, sure enough, about a mile up the road, was a magnificent castle. He was greeted at the castle gates by lords and ladies, almost as if they were expecting him. They excitedly whisked him into the great hall to meet their king, and much to Parcival's surprise, the king was the fisherman! Only now, instead of wearing the clothes of a poor fisherman, he wore rich robes of the finest silk and luxurious furs. Parcival saw, too, that the king was crippled. The king was in great pain and lay on a couch before a warming fire.

Parcival's mind raced with questions. He'd been taught that it was impolite for a knight to ask his host for explanations. A proper knight must always appear "to know." As a new knight he didn't want to embarrass himself in front of this great king.

The king motioned Parcival to sit beside him, and then he presented Parcival with a beautiful sword. The king looked at Parcival and said, "This sword is destined for you."

If you understood the patterns of story you'd shout at Parcival, "Watch out! Be careful! You do not know what you hold in your hands!" In a good story, when the main character thinks that he knows his destiny, especially when, like me, he has confused himself with a role, the lesson will come with great force, as it did to me. You think you are the recipient of a simple gift, this sword that you hold in your hands. You think you know how to use it. What you don't know is that this gift will use you. What you don't know is so much greater than what you think you know.

Parcival took the sword. He noticed, as he held the king's gift, that all the lords and ladies stared at him. They were holding their breath waiting to see what Parcival would do. Or say. It seemed that everyone in the castle, from the highest lord to the lowest serving boy was coming into the great hall to see what Parcival would do. Parcival thanked the king for his gift. He desperately wanted to know what the king meant by "destined." He wanted to know why everyone stared at him. But he had been taught it was impolite for a knight to question his host. Accept a gift with gratitude. Be silent. A knight always knows what to do. Ask no questions. Later, he thought, later I will ask my questions of one of the lesser lords.

Just then, a young man came into the hall and a hush fell over the assembly. The young man carried a lance, brilliant white, with a single bead of blood that ran from its tip down the shaft and nearly – but not quite - touched the young man's hand. Every eye watched as the young man processed across the great hall until he exited out the far door, and then all eyes turned and once again stared at Parcival. He was about to panic, when two more men entered the great hall, each carrying a candelabra burning with hundreds of candles. Blinding light filled every corner of the hall. Behind them, a beautiful girl entered. She held in her hands something so brilliant that the candles could not be seen! It was a golden bowl. Its light did not hurt Parcival's eyes. He was transfixed. He had never seen such radiance. Surely this was holy! He watched as they, too, processed across the great hall and vanished out the door on the far side of the hall.

Now his mind burned with questions, questions that he should not ask, questions that he could not ask. He would embarrass himself. He looked to the king and pretended to be cool, the image of a calm, mature, unflappable knight. He pretended that he knew what to do. In truth he was looking for a clue from the king about how to proceed. The king stared back at Parcival, with the same expectation, the same yearning that he saw in the eyes of all the lords and ladies. Parcival nodded politely, quickly pulling his gaze from the king's eyes. To his horror, he watched as the expectation drained from every eye in the room. The stares frosted over and became cold. Parcival quickly looked back to the king but the king had closed his eyes in disappointment. Slowly, the crowd averted their eyes and, without a word, they quietly left Parcival sitting all alone in the great hall.

He'd failed. That was clear. And, like me, he hadn't the slightest idea what had just happened.

6.
It was only a few moments before my next chat with Virgil and I didn't know what to do. I was deciding whether to continue the conversation or just not show up. After my walk the first day, I felt clear about patterns and why I needed to look for them. But, over the course of the week, the more I looked the more confused I became. And now I was more confused than ever.

I saw patterns everywhere. I found patterns in the news cycle, patterns in product marketing, patterns in people's expectations, patterns in television programming, and patterns in politics. When I opened my eyes to look for patterns I noticed that I moved slower and had the feeling that I was capable of seeing what was previously invisible to me. I was seeing the form and not content. I realized I was looking at the movement of things and not the message.

Businesses study customer-buying patterns all the time. The whole point of gathering data is to see patterns. Yet, when I saw patterns I also saw problems to be solved. The patterns in my wallpaper didn't quite match at the seams. I could have solved that problem. My neighborhood coffeehouse filled orders in a pattern and there is a bottleneck in their pattern. I could solve that problem in a second! My whole purpose in life was to solve problems and right now I had a problem that I could not solve! According to Virgil, it was a waste of time to think that I had a problem and yet all I could see was my problem. I had a problem! What was the point of denying it?

Was it a waste of time to believe I could solve problems for others, too?

Instead of coming back to Virgil with answers, all I had were more questions. I hated not knowing what to do or say! I felt like I was standing silent before the Sphinx after having a riddle posed to me. A week had passed since Virgil asked me a simple question:

> **Virgil:** What's the difference between a pattern and a problem? Why might it be an utter waste of time to think that you have a problem?"

Now, a week later with my mouth agape and no answers to the riddle, I imagined the Sphinx was about to grin and devour me.

It was abundantly clear that my pattern of thinking was all about problems. And why not! I was taught that an entrepreneur solves problems for people. Problem seeing and problem solving was the organizing principle of my life. When I made pitches to investors the entire format was based on identifying a problem and providing a viable, lucrative solution. I had notebooks filled with ideas for solving problems.

My teacher, my great mentor used to say, "Find the need and fill it." She pounded problem seeking and problem solving into me. "Clarify the problem and you will clarify the solution." I was her gifted student. She used to tell me, "You see the problems that other people overlook." It was true. I could see problems and a million possible solutions. It was also true that I had a string of failed businesses trailing behind me.

I read and re-read the quote I found taped on my door.

"Thought is the sculptor who can create the person you want to be."

What was wrong with my thinking? What was wrong with seeing problems? Seeing problems was my gift and Virgil was telling me that my gift was unusable.

It was time for my appointment. I took a breath. It was time to stand answerless before the Sphinx. I decided I had nothing to lose by keeping the appointment but would delay the conversation about problems for as long as possible. Maybe he'd reveal the answer or better yet, perhaps it just wouldn't come up. I typed:

> **Me:** You there?
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> **Virgil:** Hi. Yes. Welcome back. How did it go?
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> **Me:** I learned a lot about patterns.
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> **Virgil:** Tell me what you discovered.
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> **Me:** When I started looking for patterns I saw them everywhere. It was as if everything was connected through some type of pattern. In looking for patterns I started to see things that I'd never before noticed. It was as if the world came into a clearer focus.
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> **Virgil:** Good. What else?
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> **Me:** Looking for patterns made me move slower. I think that was part of practicing "not knowing," though I'm still not certain that I'm doing what you asked.
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> **Virgil:** Lol! And in this way, for now, your uncertainty is a great way of practicing "not knowing."

I hated that. In my present circumstance there was nothing great about uncertainty. I ignored him and wrote:

> **Me:** I realized that I think in patterns. I think the same stuff over and over. This is a puzzle: the act of looking for patterns opened my eyes. So, patterns reveal. And yet, later, when I became aware of the patterns of my thinking, I recognized that those patterns were like ruts or grooves. It's as if I am playing the same song over and over again so no other music can come in. My thinking pattern, my rut, prevents me from seeing. So patterns also obscure. Make sense?
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> **Virgil:** Yes. It must seem like a paradox to you. Think of the song or rut as a story that you tell yourself. Your thoughts, literally, are a story that you tell

 David Robinson

yourself about yourself and the world; the more you tell this story the deeper the rut you create. So, a good question to ask is: what is the story that you want to tell? Are you creating the pattern that you desire to create? We will return to this many times. This is important: the story is not happening to you; you are telling it. The story can only control you if you are not aware that you are telling it.

Me: Can you say more?

Virgil: We literally 'story' ourselves. We are hard-wired for story. What we think is a narrative; this pattern (song) that rolls through your mind everyday is a story that you tell. You tell it. It defines what you see and what you do not see. What you think is literally what you see.

There was a pause. That was a lot for me to take in. When I didn't respond, he continued:

Virgil: So, what you think is nothing more than a story; it's an interpretation. You move through your day seeing what you think - instead of what is there. You are not seeing the world you are seeing your interpretation of the world. You are seeing from your rut and your rut is a pattern. So, your patterns of thinking, your rut, can obscure what you see. Make sense?

Me: Yes. I guess ;-) So, when I started looking for patterns outside of me, I…stopped seeing from within my rut? I stopped assuming that I knew what I was seeing. So, I was capable of discovering new patterns and connections?

Virgil: Yes, something like that. You said that when you looked for patterns you slowed down and felt that you could see. I would say it this way: you stopped moving *through* your world and for a brief period you were actually *in* your world. For a brief period you were no longer lost in thought but present with what was right in front of you. You suspended what you think you know so you started to see again. You were curious. To be curious is synonymous with "not knowing."

Me: Okay….

Virgil: Humor me and entertain this notion: your thought, your story, is not passive. It is a creative act. What you think IS what you see. Most of the time people create what they see based on their rut. They see what they expect to see. To practice curiosity is to suspend the assumption of knowing. To practice curiosity requires us to step out of the rut. Stop assuming that you know and you gain the capacity to see beyond what you think."

A glimmer of light pierced the dark recesses of my mind. Suddenly I was back in front of the Sphinx and I could see the answer to the riddle. It was so clear! I typed:

> **Me:** Wait! Is this why I need to distinguish between problems and patterns? If I tell myself that I have a problem to solve, I am telling a certain kind of story. If I tell myself that I have a pattern to change, I am telling an entirely different kind of story. Is that true?

> **Virgil:** Yes. It sounds too simple, doesn't it? A problem is a story. It is a lens that filters your sight. A problem does not exist unless you insist that it is there. You say that you are an entrepreneur. How many great products and services were the results of an accident in the lab? How many innovations were missed because the 'solution' did not fit the 'problem' as identified? A problem is a rut that separates you from possibilities. On the other hand, a pattern connects you to possibilities. See the pattern not the problem.

> **Me:** But, how does this help me in my business?

> **Virgil:** The pattern or story you tell will determine the possibilities you see or don't see. The story you tell will determine the actions you see or do not see. For instance, you said that once you started looking you saw patterns everywhere. You saw connectivity; everything seemed part of a greater pattern.

> **Me:** Yes. It was a discovery. It was wonderful.

> **Virgil:** What did that discovery lead you to do?

> **Me:** Well, I slowed down. I looked. I saw things…I started seeing a bigger context. I saw relationships between things. I saw how things were shaped…. I saw how things could be improved. I was seeing through different eyes.

> **Virgil:** That would seem to be an important skill for an entrepreneur, don't you agree? What potential would become visible to you if you flipped from seeing problems to seeing patterns?

After our chat I received an email from Virgil with this:

The First Recognition: You do not have a problem. You have a pattern

Study: Learn to distinguish between a problem and a pattern. Study patterns as distinct from problems. Innovators do not solve problems, they pursue, they reveal, they discover, they integrate and establish new patterns. Study your patterns.

Action: Practice "Not Knowing." Get curious. Take steps because you don't know what will happen. Do things in a different order; go home by a different route. Get lost on purpose.

Exercise: 1) Look for patterns all around you; look inside and outside of you. What are the patterns you see in others? What are your patterns? 2) Make a list of all the things you pretend to know. Why do you need to pretend? What do you get from pretending to know? How does your need to pretend reveal your patterns?