

## Internal Dialogues

When I was young, my father used to talk to me about the lizard brain. Each person has a lizard brain, he'd say, and also a human brain. The lizard brain had come first, and that was all that lizards had, but over time a larger human brain grew. I understood a bit about evolution, so I could imagine the connection between myself and a lizard. The human brain did not replace the lizard brain, my father told me, it just grew around it, so we still have lizard brains. Sometimes, he explained, the lizard brain tries to take over. This made the lizard brain feel foreign to me, like an intruder in my head, because I of course wanted to think like a human.

My father explained to me that the lizard brain ran on fear, and that when it was controlling a person it simply did not think. All of the rational thinking and planning for the future took place in the human brain. At this point he would tell me, "You can decide which brain directs your actions." And each time I fought with someone – or I did something aggressive, or lost my temper– afterwards my father would remind me that I could choose whether I let the lizard brain take over.

I was maybe nine when I read *Dune*, and after that my father would often quote his favorite part to me. It went, "Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration." And I knew he was talking about the lizard brain.

In this way I received self-awareness training starting at a young age. To me the two brains lesson meant my fortune was not random: if I paid attention to the influences on my mind, I controlled who I was and how I interacted with other people.

This 'paying attention to the influences on my mind' led me to a habit I like. I have a filter in my head that insists on framing messages productively. When I think a thought like "I suck at working with groups," my mind autocorrects it to "I am not yet good at working with groups." The conditional nature of inability encourages me to improve. Before the thought "I'll never be as good as she is at math" can sink in, my mind will respond, "that's silly, work harder." I don't want to blind myself to possible improvements, to have my path in life walled in to a tiny corridor. So there is a persistent coach in my head vigilantly tearing down barriers it sees going up.

Noticing how details influence my mind has helped me in another way. In sixth grade I realized I was among the worst of my peers at interacting with other people. For example, I didn't know how to have conversations. I would just monologue at people until they got distracted and walked away. For years I watched others closely to understand what they had figured out about social interaction. I found all sorts of connections between one person's small behaviors and another person's reactions, and over time I learned to absorb the behaviors I admired in others. I'm no longer frustrated by an inability to interact socially. These days, just as I have a background process trying to examine influences on my mind, my mind is flagging subtle social communications I want to try out, and also judging the effects of what I'm currently doing. I usually do not consciously think about it anymore, just like I usually do not focus on the pattern by which my eyes scan my surroundings, but it's always there. This is another kind of awareness I value.

Through his stories of the lizard brain, my father taught me that we can control our minds if we pay attention. Later, I learned that we can decide what thoughts we think. I learned that we can change our roles in life. All of these secret powers require that we are aware of our internal dialogues.

By teaching me about the lizard brain, my father addressed more than the initial point of “first-grade Daniel, why did you just punch that kid in the neck?” (That happened once.) Six-year-old Daniel could see one message in it, and then nine-year-old Daniel could see a new message and could take it deeper. Ultimately, my father’s lesson formed the kernel of an internalized teacher: it taught me to teach myself. To me, that is the essence of the human brain.