

# Beth and Don

## Can anyone learn to “read people”?

By Richard Pomerance, Ph.D.

**M**strongest memory of high school is a girl named Beth. She seemed supernatural. It was like she could X-ray people’s personalities from 10 different angles, reading their intentions, motivations, strengths, and weaknesses, then use the data for whatever purposes she wanted. When she (rarely) looked at me, she seemed to be saying, “Poor child you don’t know how I do this, do you?” She wound up getting elected class president and snagging the most desirable boyfriend. Last I heard, she had raised three perfect children and made a fortune in real estate.

I also remember Don, Beth’s exact opposite—a complete dunce about others’ intentions or motivations. Don was president of the math club, wore odd flannel shirts with a plastic pen protector in the pocket, shamelessly sported a slide rule on his belt, and never seemed to speak. In short, he was the archetypal nerd. Which didn’t hurt his career: after graduating from MIT he became a highly esteemed professor of theoretical physics at a major university.

There were many Dons in my school. They grew up to be computer geeks or scientists, or if they were Donnas, they typically became librarians. The Beths became real estate agents or PR executives, and their male counterparts became salesmen and politicians.

### The People Reading Machinery

Beths have a set of skills and abilities that allows them to “size up” other people very quickly and translate what they’ve learned into targeted action. This ability likely derives from observing others, particularly parents, and genetics.

The picture is more complex for the Dons of the world. Don might have had some form of brain damage or depression. More likely, he suffered from an autistic disorder, perhaps Asperger’s Syndrome. Folks with Asperger’s are terrible at reading other people’s verbal and non-verbally cues. They can appear “dorky,” disengaged, or anti-social, when in fact they’re just trying to cope with extreme sensitivity to sensory stimulation.

### Strengths and Surprising Weaknesses

The weaknesses of people like Dons are obvious; but what about those like Beth? They understand how to pick up on visual and verbal cues, read body language like a pro and have a nearly uncanny ability to sense what other people are about — a great advantage for diplomats, negotiators, or businesspeople.

But the Beths of the world are often less strong in understanding the pattern of these cues to determine the person’s overall personality. They have to avoid getting swept up in their intuition, and failing to see the big picture.

### The Rest of Us

Don and Beth represent the ends of the spectrum—I’d guess about 30 percent of the population. Those of us in the middle face a nearly universal problem—we read people neither well nor badly on average. We fail to read people well because our psychological development is uneven, and some areas of our perception and understanding allow at best a fuzzy focus or half-baked inferences. In addition, we all have distortions of personality and various neurotic traits that must be discovered and corrected in order to read people well.

Unfortunately, most people assume that they already know how to read others well enough. We’re taught in homes and schools and religious organizations that we can know people through cultural similarity. Yes, people being nice to each other produces openness, which produces ease of mutual recognition, and therefore an easy reading.

But the real world is a tougher place. And when people are forced to realize that they aren’t very good at reading others, they feel embarrassed or inadequate. They tend to deny their inability or pretend it’s not important. They may look to relationships with old friends who they already know well to make themselves feel competent. They don’t think about the mistakes they make with strangers, and don’t realize that it is with the present strangers that their future lies.

So how can we learn? Dons, Asperger’s folk, nerds, techies, the left-brained, and the right brain—the rest of us—can become better at understanding what people are about than anyone ever dreamed. We just have to open our eyes, have the desire, and get to work.

I wonder what high school would have been like if this homework had been included with the English, science, and math? And if it had, I wonder, would Beth have gone out with me?

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