Embracing Your Inner Idiot

By Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

It's not every day you gain such deep insight into the human condition that you suddenly divine a revolutionary approach to maximizing personal growth. I imagine Freud experienced such a moment, perhaps as he explored the therapeutic benefits of cocaine or as he found himself becoming strangely aroused by pictures of his mother. No doubt that Carl Rogers, B. F. Skinner, Alfred Adler and other titans of psychotherapy also had their eureka moments when the path toward enlightenment became bright and clear. My impression is that life-altering ideas are more often flash fried than slow-cooked preparations.

Although my "ah-ha!" insight exploded into consciousness just a few short weeks ago, it has already changed my life, the lives of my wife and children, and those of many, many others. And now I've decided to make it all public so that you, too, can be a happier and more fulfilled individual.

The best way for me to introduce the bedrock principles underlying my program is to describe the circumstances of its inception:

I have two sons, both of whom are college-aged and therefore exorbitantly expensive. The oldest, Alex, is a reasonably well-adjusted senior, especially if you consider that both of his parents are psychologists. Nonetheless, since he was old enough to take a test, he has consistently scored well but handled the preparation poorly. The mere thought of an exam, particularly one with any degree of import or difficulty throws him into all manner of self-inflicted anguish and pain. He overstudies by such an incalculable magnitude that he can only live life to the thinnest. During these pre-test intervals, he sports a deeply creased brow,

a habit of wringing his hands, a heartfelt conviction that he will amount to nothing, and a pronounced tendency to overuse bathroom facilities. If you had poor enough judgment to take his account seriously, you would also believe that he becomes so ornery and antisocial that everyone within a five-mile radius hates him passionately.

Alex recently prepared to take the LSAT, an exam required for application to law school. Although he has performed wonderfully on past entrance-style tests, Alex nevertheless dove headlong into his customary downward spiral of misery and grief. You could just hear the agitation creep into his voice when he first mentioned that he intended to sit for the fall exam.

I am proud to say that he did not launch into his pre-test psychosis without full awareness and insight. His mother and I received frequent e-mail messages and phone calls that presented in exquisite detail the overall silliness of his concerns, the negative impact of his worries on his general happiness, and the implications of his exam craziness on social relationships. Unfortunately, his situation proved once again that the gulf between awareness and corrective action can be gapingly wide. In Alex's case, his sharp insights led to little actual control over his Kafka-esque approach to examinations.

As the weeks passed, Alex became ever more trampled by his exam-generated discomfiture. By his report, his wide circle of friends alternated between offering him caring support and a hard left to the cheekbone. As I understand it (but consider the source), he was almost voted off the island of his campus housing at least twice.

When most people confront someone in the throws of nervous agitation, they tend to offer what amounts to rather silly advice. In one way or another they say, "Just relax, all will be well" which, to the afflicted party, is akin to telling a double amputee, "No problem, just

get up and walk." If you could relax, you would relax, but you can't relax, which is why you're all nervous. Perhaps for this reason, Alex let it be known that if one more person told him to relax, he was going postal.

One way Alex tried to cope with his upset was to talk to his mother, at least until she told him he should just relax, at which point he'd get annoyed and sign off. I have the feeling mother and son were at just that point the fateful evening I discovered my earth-shattering model of behavior change. I was sinking into my pillow in preparation for a well-earned night of sleep when my wife uttered one of those phrases that strikes absolute terror into the heart of fathers: "Here, you talk some sense into him." (This comes in a close second to the more terrifying marital phrase, "We have to talk"). I can't vouch for total authenticity, but I do believe the conversation went almost exactly like this:

Me: So what's up?

Alex: I can't believe I'm making myself this crazy over a stupid exam. It's driving me nuts that I make myself this nut. I feel like a stupid fucking idiot.

Me: But Alex, you've always been a stupid fucking idiot around testing. Everyone knows you're an idiot when it comes to exams, not to mention all kinds of other stuff. Your whole life I've been trying to help you understand that, in many ways, you're a stupid fucking idiot.

Alex: It's not entirely true that everyone knows I'm an idiot.

Me: Well, tell me one person who knows you at all well who isn't aware that, at least around testing, you're a complete idiot?

Alex: [Pause] OK, you got me. I can't think of a soul. Wait, how about . . . no, she's 6 years old and even she knows I'm an idiot. But you were never an idiot

around exams.

Me: Around exams I'm not as big an idiot as you, but you're talking to someone who, dressed in a full suit and running shoes, had to present a workshop to 400 people. Why the running shoes? Because I forgot to close the pocket of my garment bag and one of my dress shoes fell out in transit. And talk about idiocy. I'll always have a 16 handicap because, when it comes to concentrating on my swing and short game, I'm a complete and total idiot.

Alex: And Mom?

Me: Your Mom? She's one of the biggest idiots of all time. (I'll leave out the details of my argument here in hopes that I'll enjoy marital relations again in due time. Plus, I need the wounds to heal from the hard jab to the ribs she delivered at this point in the conversation.)

Alex: OK, so we're a family of idiots.

Me: No, it's not just our family. Alex, everyone's a stupid fucking idiot. That's the point. It is the human condition to be an idiot about most things. (I think around this juncture I become infused with the passion born of sudden wisdom). Take all men, just for example. Look what they'll do to gain access to a mere three quarters of an inch of female aperture. They'll act like fools, bend to the will of creatures near half their size, and turn over all their worldly goods, and why? Because they're stupid fucking idiots.

And women? Hell, just to pursue an often-false sense of security and to procreate a bit, they'll put up with partners who beat them, cheat on them, and emit all manner of noxious gases at all the wrong times. Why? Because they're idiots.

Parents. Let's talk about parents. My god, speaking of idiots. By having children, women guarantee progressive hip expansion not to mention a lifetime of worry and anticipatory hurt. Fathers ensure limited access to the aforementioned aperture, get themselves deep into debt, and operate under the delusion that their children can fulfill their own unmet aspirations, and why? Because parents are, by definition, stupid fucking idiots. Don't even get me started on politicians, weather forecasters, Barbara Walters, George Bush Junior or Senior (it doesn't make any difference), Rush Limbaugh, anyone who listens to Rush Limbaugh, Boston Red Sox fans . . .

Alex: Okay, I get the point. I'm not the only idiot on the planet. Although if I were really smart, I wouldn't act like an idiot.

Me: Not true, kid. There is all sorts of good scientific evidence to suggest that high intelligence will never protect you from being a major league idiot. Being smart might make school a little easier, but it doesn't even begin to guarantee that you'll be successful on the job or in relationships. Geniuses can be the biggest fucking idiots of all.

Alex: So you're trying to help me feel better by explaining to me that everyone's an idiot, me very much included.

Me: Well, not exactly. To feel better, you would have to EMBRACE YOUR INNER FUCKING IDIOT.

Alex: Excuse me?

Me: You heard me. You have to EMBRACE YOUR INNER FUCKING IDIOT. Alex, the problem you're facing isn't so much that you're an idiot around

testing. It's that you don't accept the fact that you're an idiot around testing. You're all ashamed and frustrated with yourself because you haven't become one with your INNER IDIOT.

Alex: What in the world are you talking about?

Me: Alex, listen to me. Every inhabitant of the planet is in one or more essential ways an idiot. Some are big idiots, some are little idiots, some are arrogant idiots, some are compulsive idiots, some are happy idiots, some are miserable idiots, some are angry idiots, some are bumbling idiots, some are lying idiots, but everyone is an idiot. Identify someone who you think is close to perfect, spend a week with him, and you'll be able to list out ten different ways he's an idiot.

Alex: I'll take your word on that one.

Me: The difference is that some of us fully accept and are comfortable with our idiocy. We're not ashamed of it. We don't get overly concerned when the inevitable idiotic event occurs. At least not for long. We might not put out a sign that says, "Guess what? I'm an idiot" but we don't hide from it either. In short, we embrace our Inner Idiot.

Alex: And what gets in the way of people embracing their Inner Idiot?

Me: Somewhere along the way people got it into their minds that they could cure their god-given, innate idiocy. We've come to take ourselves too seriously and strive for a perfection no one can attain. But, alas, Alex, human nature is not a curable condition. Sure, we can problem solve around our vulnerabilities and manage our idiocy as best we can, but we'll never eradicate our deeply-

rooted tendency to act like idiots much of the time. Unfortunately, we've got all these silver tongues, new aged prophets with beatific smiles and easy slogans telling everyone how effective we can all be if we just buy their books and adopt the proper attitude. But Alex, these guys are the biggest fucking idiots of all. Plus they're dangerous because they keep people from doing what they need to do which is . . .

Alex: I know, EMBRACE THEIR INNER FUCKING IDIOT.

Me: That's right. If you're going to be a happy camper, you need to adjust to the fact that no laundry list of strategies, no cheery slogans, no mantras, no amount of drugs or alcohol, and no ashram visit will eradicate your Inner Idiot. Sure, you should be aware of how you can be an idiot and do what you can to keep it in control, but habits are strong, temperaments enduring, and personalities stubbornly resistant to change. So, my son, be at peace with your Inner Idiot.

Alex: So let me make sure I have this right. You're telling me that I'm a stupid fucking idiot, that everyone's a stupid fucking idiot, and so it's no big deal?

Me: Exactly.

Alex: What happens to people who don't embrace their inner fucking idiot?

Me: Boy, it's sad. People get themselves in massive trouble of all sorts when they fail to embrace their Inner Idiot. They can waste lifetimes trying to hide it from others, feeling ashamed of it, acting as if they didn't have one. They can live in terror that others will uncover what is probably painfully obvious, that they can be a stupid fucking idiot. They can avoid love for fear that lovers

will find out about their idiocy (as if they wouldn't anyhow). They can shy away from risk taking or act authoritarian or lord themselves over others, all because they're insecure about having an Inner Fucking Idiot.

Alex: Sounds serious.

Me: Are you kidding? From what I can tell, most of the world's ills can be tied directly to a global failure to embrace the Inner Idiot. When you lose touch with your Inner Idiot, you lose the ability to laugh at yourself and put your failings in perspective. You need to expend effort distracting people from your own weaknesses. Unfortunately, that usually entails getting uppity and, all too often, hostile.

Alex: So who do I know that you think has fully embraced his Inner Idiot?

Me: [Excited by the opening Alex gave me to offer a real-life example. My experience teaching is that one case illustration is worth a thousand didactic words.] Alex, if in Washington there were a Bureau of Standards "Individual Who Most Embraced His Inner Idiot" it would be your Uncle Howard. He's a fully actualized devotee of his Inner Idiot. He lives it, revels in it, wears it proudly on his shirt, and therefore enjoys his life. Nothing much fazes him because he's never afraid to look like an idiot. Why bother? He knows he's an idiot. Here's a guy who can take ten swings at a sand-bunkered golf ball never once coming even close, throw it out on the fairway, set up for another swing, miss the ball completely again, and, smiling, walk to the golf cart exclaiming with total conviction and peace of mind and without any rancor, "Am I a stupid fucking idiot or what?" You know he's a competent physician, a wonderful father and, regardless of what your grandmother says, and

an overall beloved member of the family. And why?

Alex: Because he has embraced his Inner Idiot.

Me: You're catching on.

Alex: Man, I hate to admit this, but I think for the first time in my life you're saying something that actually makes sense.

Me: Scary, huh?

Alex: You've got me thinking about my friend, Rob. He must be in Inner Idiot Denial. He spends his whole life trying to outdo everyone. He's always looking for ways he can put others down. A minute won't pass before he'll make some kind of arrogant comment or try to act like the ultimate expert on anything and everything.

Me: A sure sign of an individual in Inner Idiot Denial. I bet he's a defensive sonofabitch, too.

Alex: You have no idea. I think I'll need to pound him into a state of Inner Idiot Acceptance.

Me: But also watch for people who are only superficially in touch with their Inner Idiot. These are Idiots Who Protest Too Much or Faux Idiots. They spend so much time telling you what an idiot they are that they never do anything but proclaim their idiocy. Someone in touch with their Inner Idiot doesn't have to broadcast it twenty-four seven. They simply sail through the day fully confident in their idiocy.

Alex: So this is great. If I do poorly on the LSAT, I should just say, "What did you expect? I'm a stupid fucking idiot?"

Me: Don't even think of getting into victimization mode. Because everyone's an idiot,

you can't get a dispensation solely because you're an idiot. It would be like saying, "Take pity on me because I have a blood pressure." Who the hell doesn't have a blood pressure? Everyone has a responsibility to limit the impact of his or her idiocy to the extent possible. The fact that you can be an idiot doesn't excuse displays of your idiocy, especially if it hurts others. But when your inner idiot rears its ugly head, you don't spend time trying to escape responsibility for it or beating yourself up for being an idiot. You deal with it and move on. Which is all by way of saying that, for what we paid for that LSAT preparation course, you damn well better score well.

Alex: But what if I'm more than just an idiot? What if I have some kind of mental disorder?

Me: Nope. Can't be. To qualify for a mental disorder, you have to be so abnormal that you can't do the regular, everyday things that most people can do. If you were so depressed that you couldn't function like an average Joe or if you were so out of your head that you were far more maladjusted than most people or you were so anxious that you couldn't engage in normal educational and social activities, then you might meet the definition for a mental disorder. But, hell Alex, you sailed through elementary school, high school, and college. You've achieved more than most people in the population could even dream about. You have loads of long-suffering friends. You've held down all kinds of jobs. No, you don't have a mental disorder. You're just a . .

Alex: Stupid Fucking Idiot.

Me: Right. A loveable, somewhat neurotic Stupid Fucking Idiot.

At this point my now apoplectic wife grabbed the phone out of my hands. She didn't seem to understand that telling my oldest son that he was an idiot who needed to embrace his Inner Idiot was just what this doctor ordered. She promptly apologized to Alex for my outrageous behavior and proceeded to tell him that everything would be fine if he just relaxed, that if he tested poorly, he could take the exam again, that he was one of the smartest people she had ever known, and that being a lawyer wasn't necessarily for him. But then her face suddenly fell, she handed me the phone, and mumbled, "He apparently wants to talk with you."

And Alex says to me, "For God's sake, Dad, don't put Mom on again. She tried to convince me that I wasn't a stupid fucking idiot, and you know what a bad idea that is. So, one more time before I hang up, tell me that I'm an idiot, that I've always been an idiot, but that everyone's an idiot so it's no big deal and I should just embrace my Inner Idiot and move on."

I dutifully complied, he thanked me (in itself a rare and telling event), and we hung up.

I hardly slept at all that night as the implications of my Theory of Inner Idiocy mushroomed in my mind. I started creating PowerPoint slides in my head for lectures on "Styles of Inner Idiocy Avoidance" or "The Developmental Progression of Inner Idiocy Awareness/Acceptance." One of the slides looked like this:

Symptoms of Inner Idiocy Avoidance

Shyness: The consequences of hiding in hopes that nobody will notice that you're an idiot

Anxiety: The nervousness you feel inside when you think

someone might find out you're an idiot

Depression: **The sadness you feel inside when you think people will reject you for being an idiot or when you hate yourself for being an idiot**

Arrogance: **An insecurity-generated attitude that says, "I'm superior to you so don't even try to discover that I'm an idiot."**

Antisocial Behavior: **What happens when you may be in touch with your Inner Idiot but you don't give a damn how it affects anyone else.**

But it didn't stop there. I started to ponder the impact of my Inner Idiot Theory on marital therapy. After all, what's a more important ingredient to a good marriage than not only accepting your own Inner Idiot, but also accepting your mate's idiocies? Is not love but the act of mutual Inner Idiocy acceptance? Why not establish the Inner Idiot Institute for Marital Harmony? We could run encounter weekends chocked full with exercises designed to help couples come to terms with their own and each other's failings. Hell, I could even write a book entitled, "Embracing Your Inner Idiot: Sexual Positions," although I'm not sure precisely what I'd say other than that the road to sexual fulfillment entails accepting that, because everyone acts like an idiot during sex, you

should relax and have fun.

And take religion. If you ask me (and you really shouldn't), religion has predominated to such an extent in human affairs because it helps people accept their Inner Idiot. Think about it. Religions posit an all-knowing, supreme, and perfect god, that is, someone who's not an idiot. While we're supposed to do the best we can to emulate the heavenly non-idiot, it's assumed we can't because we're all born to be idiots. So religions are telling us, "Look, while it would be good if we could always do the right thing, it's not going to happen. If it did, you'd be a god and you know that's not in the cards. So, accept your inner idiot, pray that it won't mess up your life too much, and walk away content." To my theologically limited mind, religions focus so much on the notion of forgiveness because we all must forgive the rampant idiocy that lives within each of us.

So on through the night my brain rumbles. I come up with book titles like, "Embracing Your Inner Idiot: A Guide for Golfers" (you've probably noticed I have this tiny obsession with golf), "Timmy and his Inner Idiot" (a series of children's books designed to help children develop good idiocy management skills), "Inner Idiocy in the Sunset Years" (this one's pretty obvious and probably unnecessary because aging entails a natural acceptance of the inner idiot, but I like talking with older people and the baby boomers are going to be a big market), and "Inner Idiots for Dummies."

And then my imagination, as it is wont to do, runs absolutely amok. (One of the more enduring ways I can be idiotic is that I get caught up in endless fantasies that have me as rich, famous, and much admired). I imagine walking through airports, gratified to see my best-selling book, "Embracing Your Inner Idiot," lining the shelves of every WordSmith and Barnes & Nobles along the terminal. Of course, I'm in the airport on my way to another interview with Jay or Oprah,

both of whom clamor to get me on their show because Inner Idiocy fever has swept the country. People sitting in gate areas are wearing t-shirts that read, “In Touch with My Inner Idiot.” The cover of Newsweek has emblazoned across it: “Are we a country of idiots?” By my side is a Hollywood executive who wants to write a movie starring someone like Meg Ryan wherein two people out of touch with their inner idiot are thrown together for the weekend and, through a series of improbable events, get in touch both individually and mutually with their Inner Idiot.

By dawn I have myself convinced that the name Michael Gordon will be right up there with the likes of Deepak Chopra or Tony What’s His Name with the Big White Teeth or all those other idiots who make a fortune acting as if they knew what the hell could make people happy. Maybe presidents will call me as their spiritual advisor when they feel in personal distress and I’d tell someone like Bill Clinton, “You may be the leader of the free world and one brilliant fellow but, Bill, you are one stupid fucking idiot, at least when it comes to the deployment of your genitalia. You might want to think about keeping your pants zipped and then find inner peace through the realization that all the power and brains in the world won’t keep you from being an idiot. In fact, power more than anything else can delude you into thinking the worst of thoughts, that you’re not an idiot.”

Sometime around 4 a.m. I’m thinking, “O.K., even if presidents don’t call me for advice, I could still make some hay on this idea. After all, we do have these two hefty college tuitions to pay off, I’d like to retire early, and I’ve had my eye on this Gibson 350 ES with a sunburst finish, plus it would be cool to get one of those industrial-type stoves in the kitchen so I could cook like Emeril. I bet my best buddy Larry and I could go around the country (South during the winter so we could play golf, North during the summer so we could play golf), rent out ball rooms, wear

those hands-free microphones like all these motivational speakers put on, and lecture the masses on the wisdom of accepting your Inner Idiot.

Over the weeks that unfold in my head that night, the following non-events occur:

- I get word that Hillary Rodham Clinton, inspired by my work, pens a sequel to her own bestseller. She entitles this newest offering, "It Takes a Village Idiot." The late-night comics have a field day with this title, of course. Letterman quipped, "Yeah, it takes a village idiot to stay with Bill." Nonetheless, attention to her book promotes an even more intense focus on mine.
- The Harvard Business School invites me to present a series of lectures based on my seminal treatise, "On Managing Idiots." They are intrigued by an approach that says to managers, "Don't spend so much time pumping your employees to search for excellence or strive for perfection. You shouldn't even waste all that money on motivational speakers whose outrageous fees have never been shown to increase sales or productivity for more than about 20 minutes. Instead, create an environment that is idiot friendly. Communicate to employees, "Look, I know there will be many occasions when you're going to act like an idiot. Hell, I'm going to act like an idiot much of them time. So let's all try to identify our idiot tendencies, work together to keep them to a minimum, problem solve effectively when you do something idiotic, and create an environment in which it's OK to screw up, at least to a point." My remarks at Harvard are accepted enthusiastically, especially when I declare, "You must embrace your corporate inner idiot."
- If you picked out ten magazines at random, at least four would have at least one

story about me, the Guru of Inner Idiocy. Most are puff pieces written by people who never read my books, but who were amused by the concept and impressed by its hold on America. Occasionally, a classier, more elaborated article would appear, maybe in Esquire or the Sunday New York Times. You know, the kind that starts, "We talked in a trendy Soho bistro over pan-fried duck breast and spaetzle. Dr. Gordon was dressed in his customary outfit: a blue oxford cloth shirt, khaki Dockers with a stain on the left leg, and a blue sports coat that looked like it spent entirely too much time under a golf bag in the trunk of his car."

- In a move intended to horn in on my growing empire, Alcoholics Anonymous voted to create a 12-step program for idiots. It established the following rules:

The Twelve Steps of Idiots Anonymous

- **We admitted we are all idiots -- that our lives are ruled by our idiocy.**
- **We came to believe that nothing could restore us to a state of non-idiocy, although prayer may be comforting.**
- **We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of our inner idiot.**
- **We admitted to anyone who'd listen the exact nature of our idiocies.**
- **We are entirely ready to live comfortably with our idiocy**
- **We will never use our idiocy as an excuse for wrongdoing or insensitivity to others.**
- **When we screw up, we endeavor to make amends and move on.**
- **We will make a list that details how everyone else we know is an idiot too. In this way we will not become intimidated by others.**

- **If we have the option to laugh or cry over our idiocy, we will chose laughter.**
- **If we see someone else acting like an idiot, we will find a caring way of letting them know they're acting like an idiot.**
- **We never delude ourselves into thinking that anything or anyone can magically transform us into a non-idiot.**
- **We accept that our inner idiot is a blessing of human nature, not a defect to be eradicated.**

On and on it goes throughout the early morning hours, my mind racing on the high-octane fuel of unbridled narcissism.

The funny thing is, the next day I did head for the airport to travel to a meeting in Virginia where I met up with some of the finer minds in the field of clinical psychology. Because I've grown to feel quite comfortable looking like an idiot, I didn't waste too much time finding ways to articulate my Theory of Inner Idiocy. At first my colleagues just laughed at the humor of my story about Alex. I think they thought that this was yet another one of my cute little anecdotes that might find its way into a lecture or workshop.

But then I noticed a change in conversations as the ramifications of my theory took hold. Sentences that started in comedy ended in theoretical jargon and calls for further research. These great minds began to wonder about the genetics of Inner Idiocy (they weren't sure whether the gene for the Inner Idiot resides on the 22nd or 23rd chromosome), the relationship between Inner Idiocy Identity Formation and the more traditional concepts of adolescent adjustment, or the likelihood that Prozac and Zoloft worked on neural networks directly tied to acceptance of the inner idiot. The family therapists among us proclaimed that I had stumbled on the perfect paradigm

for improving a family's mode of interaction, thereby reducing the possibility of triangulating and system-blocking miscommunications. The clinical child psychologists wondered how we might convince some parents that they would be better off accepting their child's inner idiot than pursuing unwarranted diagnoses and services. All through the conference, speakers found ways of recasting their lectures in terms associated with my Theory of Inner Idiocy. The idiot always, I felt that I had unleashed a Kuhnsian-type paradigm shift upon this mass of academics.

I know full well that my fantasies surrounding the proliferation of my theory are just that, fantasies. They'll go the way of most of my fantasies, which is to say nowhere. And I've had some good ideas. Like a business that rents appealing dogs to guys looking to pick up women but who don't want the lifetime commitment of owning a pet. I even had the perfect name: "Rent to Bone." And that's not all. How about glow-in-the-dark underwear that allows for easy post-coital skivvies location.

I'm afraid that even the voracious national appetite for self-help books might pass on my idea. I expect there's a chance that the publishing industry might be concerned about distributing a book that convinces readers that they're idiots. Be that as it may, I'm going to hunt down an agent and do my damndest to convince her that this is big, baby, big and I mean huge. I am going to lay it on all kinds of thick about the wisdom of embracing "Embracing your Inner Idiot."

If not, well, at least you've had a chance to get in touch with your own Inner Idiot. Maybe next time you screw up, you'll keep yourself from getting too angry, agitated, or sad. You'll listen to that tiny little voice inside telling you that, despite all your best efforts, you're a stupid fucking idiot. And maybe you'll remember that everyone's an idiot, ergo it's no big deal, so let's cope with it and move on. Or if you're dealing with someone who's putting you down, that same inner voice

might help you stave off feeling intimidated or shamed when it says, “He can say what he wants, but my god, is he a Stupid Fucking Idiot in Denial or what?” You’ll be better for it. Trust me.