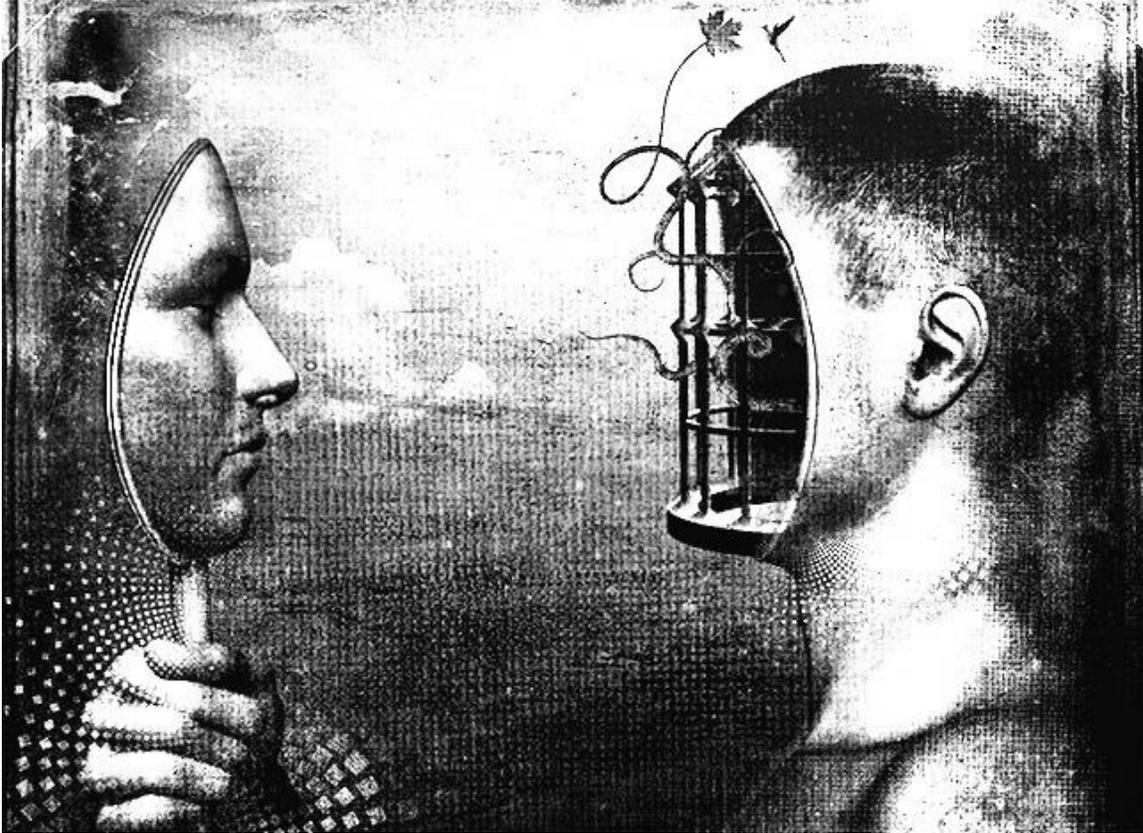




# English 10

## On the exploration and conquest of inner space



If you think about it, the inside of your own mind is the only thing you can be sure of. Whatever you believe—whether it’s about the sun, moon, and stars, the house and neighborhood in which you live, history, science, other people, even the existence of your own body—is based on your experiences and thoughts, feelings, and sense impressions. That’s all you have to go on directly, whether you see the book in your hands, or feel the floor under your feet, or remember that water is H<sub>2</sub>O. Everything else is farther away from you than your inner experiences and thoughts, and reaches you only through them.

**Thomas Nagel, “What Does it All Mean?”**

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The purpose of English 10 is to teach you how to question everything you think you know about the world—beginning, first and foremost, with yourself. All true understanding has to begin with some measure of self-understanding. To put it another way, you have to know something about yourself before you know very much about anything else. There is a vast universe that exists inside your head; scientists call this “consciousness” or “the mind”. And this “inner space” is just as mysterious and foreboding as the ocean of stars beyond our solar system. How do you explore this inner space? How do you get to know your own mind? We have one essential tool at our disposal: language. Words are the vehicle that allows us to explore the endless terrain within our own minds.

Let's start with a question:



It might seem like a simple question until you try to answer it and really think about the answer you're giving. Suppose I asked you this question: "Who are you?" What would you say?

Your first impulse might be to state your name. But that isn't really who you are, is it? You could change your name but that would hardly make you a different person. Maybe you'd answer with a few biographical details, such as your age, your sex, where you live, who your parents are. But none of these things really seem to explain who you are. There are lots of other people your age, your sex, and who live in your town. Your parents might have other children but even if they don't, surely the answer to the question "Who are you?" can't simply be to name your parents. Naming your parents doesn't tell me who you are; it only tells me who your parents are.

On and on and on we could go; with every answer you give to the question "Who are you?" I could ask "But is that really who you are?" And each time I asked that, you would probably have to admit that no, that isn't necessarily really who you are.

Now before we worry about this question too much, let me throw out two additional questions just to make things even trickier:

1. Why does it matter that you know who you are?
2. What does knowing who you are have to do with English 10?

Let's talk about these one at a time.

As to the first question, I think it might be obvious why you need to know who you are. What's the alternative? To know nothing about yourself? To be a stranger to yourself? Believe it or not, there are people like this. One way to describe them is to say that they lack self-awareness. It's not as unusual as you might think. Think about the guy who is a complete jerk to everyone even though he thinks of himself as a nice person. Or the girl who thinks she's an incredible singer even though her voice is actually quite terrible. Lots of people lack self-awareness.

Let me illustrate the importance of self-awareness with a little story.

Two tadpoles were swimming in a pond. One of them turned into a frog and left the pond, then returned. The remaining tadpole asked the frog, "Where did you go?"

"To land," said the frog.

"What's land?" said the tadpole.

"Land is where it is dry," said the frog.

"What's dry?" said the tadpole.

"Dry is where there is no water," said the frog.

"And what is water?" said the tadpole.

"What?" said the frog, amazed. "How can you not know what water is? It's all around you!"

The moral of the story is quite simple. If we are not self-aware, if we are not reflective, if we do not think about who we are and why we do the things we do, then we will go through life with a very dangerous tendency to miss the obvious. The things that are all around us are sometimes the most difficult things to understand. And if we can't understand the things around us, how can we understand anything else?



Now for the second question: What does this have to do with English? Perhaps you are thinking something like this: “Okay, I agree. Knowing who I am is extremely important, but this is English 10, isn’t it? Aren’t we supposed to be talking about nouns and verbs and that sort of thing? Why are we talking about ‘knowing ourselves’?”

Excellent question. The answer is actually quite simple (and I even hinted at it at the start of this course outline). It’s also very important, so I’m going to boldface it and put it in all capital letters. Here it is:

**LANGUAGE IS HUMANITY’S GREATEST GIFT. IT IS ABSOLUTELY CENTRAL TO WHAT MAKES US HUMAN. IT IS ALSO OUR MOST POWERFUL TOOL. IT ALLOWS US TO THINK, TO QUESTION, TO REASON, TO COMMUNICATE, TO KNOW OTHERS, AND TO KNOW OURSELVES.**

Does that make sense? We start to understand ourselves by using language. We talk to family and friends about what’s on our mind. We read books to find out what other people, including some very brilliant people, have thought about the things we’re dealing with. We write, putting down our thoughts and feelings on paper where they often take on a life of their own. And as we do this more and more we start to wake up to the world around us—and the world inside us.



So that, in a nutshell, is what English 9 is all about. It’s about learning to master language to gain personal power. It’s about using language to achieve self-discovery. It’s about experiencing language to learn more about the world. Most importantly of all, it’s about trying to learn how to learn, so that you can keep learning for the rest of your life. To be honest with you, I think that some of the things students have to do in school are a waste of time. Some of them are done for no reason other than inertia; they’ve always been done, so teachers keep doing them, even though

they have no real point or value. And some of the things students have to do in school are done because they are easy for the teacher even though they don't help the students learn anything. I want to make sure that this course, as much as possible, isn't like that. I want to make sure that the things we do have value for you, that you really benefit from them and find them engaging. We're going to cover a lot of ground this year. We're going to read books, poems, newspaper articles, personal essays, comic books, and web-based publishing. We're also going to watch documentary films, narrative films, short films, interviews, and video lectures. Woven throughout all of these forms of media will be this consistent theme of self-awareness through mastery of language. That is something you can take with you at the end of the year; it is something that will stay with you for life.

One last thing. I'd like to leave you with a story. In our first few classes I'm going to ask you what the point of this story is, or what the "moral" is, if you prefer that term. Here it is:

### **THE STORY OF THE FOUR STUDENTS**

A long time ago, in a small village by the sea, there lived four young men who decided to become monks. They presented themselves at the local monastery and told the priest who lived there of their intention. The priest chuckled. "Are you sure you want to become monks? It is a hard life that requires great discipline." But the young men were certain, and said so.

So the priest admitted the young men into the monastery and said, "You are now students of the monastery. Your first task is to meditate for the rest of the day in absolute silence. You can continue to study at the monastery as long as you do this one thing." And he showed the young men into a small room lit by a single oil lamp. Then he closed the door and left the students alone.

At first everything went well. The four students meditated in complete silence. In fact, they began to think that this was one of the easiest things they had ever done. It was certainly easier than working in the fields all day! But soon evening approached, and it grew dark outside, and the lamp began to dim, and finally burned out.

For awhile the four students sat in darkness, but finally one of them couldn't help himself, and he blurted out, "Someone needs to light that lamp again!"

The second student scolded him. "We aren't supposed to talk!"

"You idiots!" said the third. "Now you've both spoken!"

"I'm the only one who has not talked," said the fourth.



That's the story. What do you think it means? Give that some thought and we'll talk about it later this week.

I look forward to getting to know you this year.

Let's begin.

