

## We all interpret reality differently



**With his augmented reality headset he's actually eating in a five star restaurant.**

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*We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are.* Anais Nin

UT Austin is playing Oklahoma at the annual Cotton Bowl game in Dallas. The stadium holds 92,100 rabid fans. With three minutes to play, the team that is ahead by two points fumbles the ball and the other team recovers. One half of the fans are elated: they're jumping in the air, making loud sounds, and endorphins are taking over their brains. The other 46,050 people are deflated: they fall quiet; a mixture of anger, frustration, and hopelessness prevails.

How did this event elicit such diverse responses?

Here's a more simple illustration of where I'm going with this post.

Several days ago I read two sentences that took my breath away. Literally, I had difficulty breathing for about 10 seconds. As I continued to read I choked up; several times I had to put the book down.

An hour later, at dinner, I told Mary and my daughter, Sarah, about the incident. They wanted to read what had impacted me so deeply so I handed Sarah the book and she read the phrases. Neither she nor Mary were in the least bit moved by the prose; it was as if they had just read the weather report.

These two incidents (football game, passage from a book) remind me of the fact that each of us

experiences the world from our own unique perspective. Our perspective is a blend of where we are emotionally (in general and in the moment), mentally, physically, historically, spiritually...in all the ways that make us human and unique.

Nearly every stimuli in life is interpreted differently by each individual.

- I once taught a lesson on the importance of having a good work ethic. One wife in the audience was hoping her husband would pay attention and take the message to heart—his work history was sporadic. Another wife was wishing they had stayed home that day—her husband was a workaholic and my words were giving fuel to his unbalanced life.
- An announcement is made at work that the boss has been fired. Every employee interprets it differently. Some are happy while others are angry; some are anxious (am I going to lose my job?), while others are relieved.
- A place—a city, hotel, church, park—can conjure up painful memories for one person while bringing joy to another.

What are some lessons to learn from this obvious observation? I'm going to adjust my life in several areas:

1. I need to be more aware of, and sensitive to, other people, because we are all interpreting reality based on our own perspectives. Other people's response to the exact same stimulus will be different from mine, in subtle or significant ways, and I need to accept that and give margin to it.
2. When I am strongly affected by something that has happened, I should not inordinately project my thoughts and feelings on others. (The key word in that sentence is *inordinately*.) I should realize that my reactions are highly personal and may be inappropriate to share.

By the way, [here's what I read in that book](#) that took my breath away.