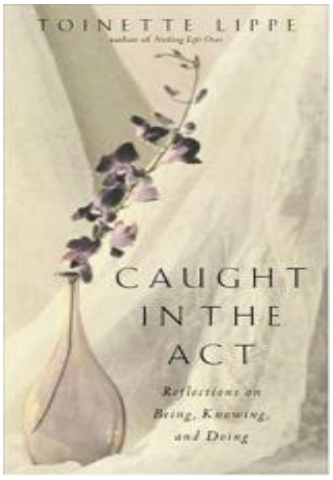
Caught in the Act: Reflections on Being, Knowing, and Doing

by Toinette Lippe



About the Book

This is a literate and deeply felt meditation that illuminates the truth of who we are. We all hold deep-seated beliefs about three essential elements of our lives: what we do (and are not willing to do); what we know (and are certain that we don't know); and what we are (and are not). We invest each of these activities with our life force and yet we are so close to them we cannot see them clearly.

In **Caught in the Act**, Toinette Lippe --- with wit, a laser-sharp eye for detail, and a sense of the contemplative --- brings us on a journey of awareness so that we perceive how being, knowing, and doing shape our daily existence.

Ultimately, **Caught in the Act** is a journey of surrender. In its pages, we learn to give up the illusion of identifying with the thoughts and activities that we call "I" --- a vital step on the spiritual path and in the search for an authentic life.

Discussion Guide

1. "Not only do we spend most of our lives 'doing' something, we tend to believe that we are what we do. In the U.S., when people are introduced, their first question is, 'What do you do?' and my usual response is, 'I am an editor (or a writer)' rather than 'I edit (or write).' Yet the inquiry was not about who I was but what I did. So many of us are 'caught in the act.'" (p. 3) Why do we identify so strongly with our work and what does this say about us? What about all the other things we are passionate about that we don't mention up front?

2. What is the function of play in our life? Is it as important as work? When we say "Enjoy yourself," what do we mean? And if we don't enjoy something, should we continue to do it? Some of us treat play as though it were just more work. Can we introduce playfulness into our work? Where is the balance between work and play?

3. "If you have a fixed idea in your mind that only one way is right, then, ipso facto, all other methods are wrong. This offers no latitude and means that much of what we attempt is doomed to failure. In addition, every action is infused with fear --- the fear of failure." (p. 15) Where does the desire to get things right come from and why is it so strong? Surely there isn't just one right way to do everything?

4. "Why are fear and doubt so strong? A great deal of it has to do with holding onto what we know and being consumed by the fear of what we don't know. We want to keep everything under control so that we will be 'safe,' although, if we were honest, we would admit that no one has absolute control over anything." (p. 16) What is our experience with fear and doubt?

5. For most of us it is hard to remember how we learned to do something. One of the reasons Toinette Lippe decided to study brushpainting was so she could observe what actually goes on in our minds and bodies as we endeavor to acquire a new skill. Have you ever watched yourself as you learned a new technique and what did you see?

6. "We live our lives as though whatever we want might arrive in the very next moment --- but not this one." (p. 32) This is a way of avoiding being in the present. What is it that makes it so hard for us to remain in the present moment?

7. "If you consider how unaware most of us are almost all the time, it is a miracle that the world still functions as well as it does. It is not that we have the odd moment of inattention. What we have are infrequent moments of attention and these moments are very fleeting. Isn't this is a little scary?" In describing her (failed) attempt to remember the eggs she had put in a pan to boil (p. 34), Lippe pinpoints how fickle our attention is. What is it that deflects our attention from whatever is right in front of us?

8. Lippe used the disciplines of yoga, tai chi chuan, and brushpainting to see how she could release the superfluous effort she was putting into everything she did. She tried "allowing the energy to flow of its own accord, which it will do if you don't keep limiting it and directing it where you think it ought to go." (p. 79) Have we ever tried relaxing our iron grip on effort and what happened when we did this?

9. "I learned the same amount from each teacher even though it appeared that two of them were being generous and one stingy. No matter what the painting teacher offered me, at that stage I was not yet able to make any more of it my own. However wonderful my teacher is, I cannot learn more than I am able and willing to receive." (p. 121) Have we ever noticed this in our attempts to study something? How much learning depends on the teacher and how much on the student?

10. "All the hiccups in our lives loom so large and appear so calamitous because we hold them in front of our faces and obscure everything else. At such times we are rarely aware of the world around us and therefore nothing is seen in perspective." (p. 123) How can we remedy this so that we are not so easily upset?

11. While in Japan, Lippe's "attention was caught by a drawing with just a couple of petals and a single leaf visible at the edge of the paper. It would never have occurred to me to paint a blossom that was almost out of view and my heart gave a great leap. I saw in that moment that there were countless ways of seeing things differently from the way I usually did." (p. 135) In what ways have we tried to gain a fresh perspective on the world?

Author Bio

Born in London, Toinette Lippe has had a long and distinguished career in publishing. In 1964 she came to New York City "for a year," worked at Simon and Schuster for three years, and then at Alfred A. Knopf as reprint rights director and editor for thirty-two years. In 1989, while still at Knopf, she founded Bell Tower, an imprint devoted to books that nourish the soul, illuminate the mind, and speak directly to the heart. Since 2000 she has continued as editorial director of Bell Tower, in addition to writing and studying Chinese brushpainting. Her first book, **Nothing Left Over: A Plain and Simple Life**, was published in 2002. She lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Critical Praise

"If we're fortunate, there are a couple of junctures in our lives when we have the leisure and impetus to reflect on the past and consider our future. **Caught in the Act** witnesses a mature woman, mostly quit now of career and child-rearing, contemplating how what you do becomes what you are. Her search for meaning proceeds along an idiosyncratic line of inquiry. She has a curious mind, an indefatigable eye for detail and a serious intellect. To see what a mind like that does with semi-retirement, read **Caught in the Act**."

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