

**The relation of the individual to the whole**

*"A human being is part of the whole called by us the universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness."*

Albert Einstein (1988)

As human beings, we are an integral part of a complex, dynamic energy that is the earth. Our relation, and interaction, with this structure is *synthetic* and goes far beyond the possibilities of analytical reduction of the rational mind. Human life is caught in the dialectic of the limited trying to understand the whole: between experience and the articulation of experience. Between the subjective and the objective.

We create a world from an infinite possibility of worlds.

This creation, and our understanding, arises from our direct contact with our environment, through our senses.

All thought must be understood within the context that gave rise to it. Each of us is caught in a specific perception arising from our context of time, place and experience. We *can* only know the world from the limitation of our own viewpoint and experience. It seems that this specificity of vision: the need to stabilize and fix that which is in constant evolution is part of the condition of mental process. Limitation is the necessity of form: without rules and a grammar of expression, there can be no communication, no evolution of ideas, no articulation of experience: no culture:

*"We give stability to our world only through our capacity to recreate it by ignoring differences and attending to similarities."*

Postman (1996)

The human mind is designed to find patterns, to create structures that allow us to function in the present and predict the future. We learn to sift the millions of sense impressions we receive at every moment ignore the irrelevant and seize on those critical to our survival. Through the flux of change we seek coherence and meaning through our stories.

**Stories**

*"As Immanuel Kant pointed out in 'The Critique of Pure Reason', if there is an objective reality, it is unknowable. All we can know is the reality we construct. That reality takes the form of a story."*

Sternberg (1999)

*"Our genius lies in our capacity to make meaning through the creation of narratives that give point to our labours, exalt our history, elucidate the present, and give direction to our future... The purpose of a narrative is to give meaning to the world, not to describe it scientifically."*

Postman (1996)

This form, this reality, is created through narrative: *"In the beginning was the word"*. We know nothing but stories: we weave our own coherence into events from the threads and colours that we have at our disposition. We weave cushion covers and comforters, unfinished fragments sewn into patchwork covers and large tapestries, worked on for generations by armies of weavers, marvellous in their complexity. Through our weaving we seek

to decode a pattern of meaning. We seek to relate ourselves to the world, to find our place in the picture. We seek articulation and expression of our relationship to existence, to give expression to this uniqueness of identity and perception from our experience in time and space and to find connection to others.

To say these worlds are not absolute is not to deny their value; they are the expression of subjective experience at a certain point of time and space, embodying a relationship between external reality and a perception caught in cultural values, expectations and education. Culture gives rise to a language of expression without which there could be no form. Each world is a unique and valuable creation.

### **Fixity**

*"We need to realize that the tacit contains experience, the unconscious, the unknown, the limitless – in short reality – and that the explicit is merely a map of experience."*

Dunstan Martin (1991)

*"For, as it should be by now abundantly clear, nothing inside a frame can state, or even ask, anything about that frame."*

Watzlawick, Bavelas & Jackson (1967)

But, our stories absorb us, take us over: so real are they to us that they become Reality. We reduce Reality to *our* language, *our* thoughts and *our* experience. Our stories lose the beautiful sheen of becoming; we forget that we are ourselves *within* the story that is an ongoing telling. If we are absorbed entirely with the individual narrative, we circumscribe the world to this limitation. We begin to reject other stories: we believe that one form of expression is more 'true' than another. That our religion is more 'true' than another or that science is more 'true' than religion for example.

Further, as Schwarz's research (1992. 94) shows, certain cultural narratives tend to favour value structures that may be diametrically opposed to those of others; whether the freedom of the individual or the well-being of the group is more important or whether we believe society should be hierarchical or egalitarian, for example. Such fundamental beliefs can be so central to our cultural narrative that we cannot even perceive that they are not absolutes.

We attempt to fix in explanation that which has movement and change as part of its very nature. Explanation is not meaning: you cannot take our perception out of the picture: our world is ours: *"We cannot know things as they exist independently of our perceptual and conceptual apparatus because the only way we can gain knowledge is through our perceptual and conceptual apparatus."* (James Gilligan, 2004) The fulcrum point of objectivity is another myth.

The simple truth is that we cannot know *The Truth*; we can no only a *truth*: that truth which arises from our own experience, perception and cultural values. Yet, like children, as Scott Peck writes, we hold on the illusion that we are the centre of the universe and that those who do not share our perceptions are mistaken or even evil. Much human misery arises from mistaking the subjective for the objective and reducing of reality to fixed

and inflexible models, rather than the living, breathing relations of which it consists.

If we are willing to accept the nature of our limitation, then we are open to others and treat them with respect and tolerance. Research shows that it is a sense of not being respected that leads to conflict and violence on an individual and global level (Gilligan, 2001). Knowing that our ideas, beliefs and feelings are not absolutes, but part of a complex interactive dance, should teach us this respect and tolerance for others. Each person we meet can give us a new insight into Reality and into ourselves.

### **The Problem of power**

However, insecurity and fear: the need for power and control remain primary motivations in human behaviour as we attempt to find stability and certainty in the flux and uncertainty of life. Fear of what we cannot control make us put into place measures of limitation. We wish to impose our reality, and our values, upon the world and restrain its vagaries to our own measure. Built into our anthropological roots are instincts for survival; each negotiates his or her place within a hierarchy; smooth functioning of the group requires mutual cooperation, while individual success within the system is dependant on the capacity to wield power and pass it on the family group by choosing a physically and socially successful mate. The dynamics of power relations, social dominance, violence and love can be explained in anthropological terms Bateson (1972). As Bourdieu (1977) out, cultural value can be used to maintain social distinction and hierarchy and legitimizes the power of the dominant group. By imposing our narrative on the world we can control it but, in doing so, we become trapped in our narrow vision.

### **Modernism**

The Age of Enlightenment sought to free man from the tyranny of uncertainty and superstition and was at the heart of a profound change in our way of thinking that was to culminate in Modernism. In the midst of the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fragmentary, the project of modernity was to discover the 'eternal' and 'immutable' (Harvey, 1990). Arising from the context of industrialization and scientific advance, Modernism championed the triumph of rationality. Its metaphor was the machine and its actors believed in the capacity of the rational human mind to bring utopia through the application of "master" plans. Through rationality man could solve problems of poverty, illness and communication and create a new, just society. Symbolic of this dream, a new rational architecture was envisaged based on the purity of abstract mathematics: a house would be "a machine for living" and the town planned from scratch on a geometric grid that prioritises the modernist miracle, the motorcar. Metaphors of machines and technology replaced those of nature.

In the early years of the twentieth century, Modernism created a heady optimism, with its symbols of the vibrant energy of the city and the unleashed power of the automobile. The first mechanical war might have been a signal of caution to this enthusiasm, but its consequences were to destroy once and for all an economic and class system and unleash the power of another great metaphor: Freud's unconscious: in which the

rationality of "civilized man" is constantly under threat from the dark, primitive urges of the animal, making us all the more suspicious of instinct. This was to separate definitively the "old knowledge" from the new and create the basis of new form of communication and control: advertising, Edward Burnaise (BBC, 2002) developing techniques based on Freud's theories to read the inner desires of individuals and fulfil them with products.

Meanwhile, power changed its focus from birth and family to wealth and, with growing industrialization and then globalization, economics was now to play a dominant role. The Industrial Revolution had already separated conception from production and management from labour: Modernism placed man as the objective director on the stage of life, separating explanation from experience. Advertising and the computer would further separate idea from experience. The result has been a radical shift in the way that we use our brains, allowing the left, conceptual hemisphere to dominate the right hemisphere's capacity for direct perception.

### **The Separation**

*"The old beliefs were based on a description of reality that emphasized the unity or dependent origination of all life, whereas the new scientific perspective emphasizes its separateness. It seems to say that we stand apart – outside the rest of creation. And to gain a greater understanding of the way nature works, we simply have to split matter into smaller and smaller fragments and examine the various pieces in isolation."*

Norberg-Hodge (2000)

*"It seems clear that by cutting ourselves off from nature, by turning nature into scenery and commodities, we may have cut ourselves off from something vital. To repair this damage we can't any longer take what we call "nature" for an object. We must merge it again with our own nature."*

McDonald (2002))

*"Lots of people hardly ever feel real soil under their feet, see plants grow except in flower pots, or get far enough beyond the street light to catch the enchantment of a night sky studded with stars. When people live far from the scenes of the Great Spirit's making, it's easy for them to forget his laws."*

Walking Buffalo (*cit.* McLuhan, 1992)

Growing urbanism, industrial production the dominant rational of science cut the umbilical cord of nature and of the past. The structures that we have put in place replace the references of nature; day and night, seasons, distance and biological time. The dominant, intellectual intelligence neglects all other forms of knowing.

This dominance given to analytical reasoning devalued such concepts as mystery, wisdom, intuition and spirituality, fixing its metaphor in the machine, yet neither machines nor computers are human: why are we so keen to impose them as metaphors on our existence? As Ritzer (2004) argues, the ostensible benefits of rational production efficiency, quantification and calculation, predictability and control lead to dehumanisation. Human needs are subjugated to the needs of the system.

Bernstein (1985) wrote, *“The growth of purposive-instrumental rationality does not lead to the concrete realization of universal freedom but to the creation of an ‘iron cage’ of bureaucratic rationality from which there is no escape.”*

The separation of idea from experience and of man from direct contact with the natural world has allowed the increasing domination of one system: global, corporate capitalism, which takes little account of human nature and needs. Dedicated to the single aim of profit, it focuses on cheaper production and ever-increasing turnover, without questioning whether it improves our quality of life or experience. Millions of people are exploited, working in appalling conditions for little pay (Klein, 2000) to feed the insatiable greed of the system, while the planet suffers rape, spiralling pollution and extinction of species to the extent that serious researchers seriously question our survival.

We are caught in the grasp of this system that is not human: moving on a tread wheel of time that accelerated at an ever-faster pace. Torn from the context of the natural world with its endless variety of growth and change: of colour, of light, of atmosphere and form, we move within the unforgiving environment of human standardization and the remorseless destruction of that which supports us and nurtures life. Commerce seeks the “perfect”, standard apple – not the apple that arises from the specific climatic conditions of a specific geographical location, with certain soil that gives it a unique taste and subtlety of flavour. The possible variations are infinite and infinitely subtle and only with attention, openness and time can this subtlety be appreciated. This variation is reflected in the richness of languages arising out of cultural experience and expression; this richness is also in danger. Each year languages disappear and the Atlas on Endangered Languages (UNESCO) claims over 3,000 to be endangered, seriously endangered or dying.

We are sold the illusion of a freedom that long ceased to exist. The mythology of the car is an apt illustration of this blatant contradiction: sold as ultimate freedom and luxury, we mortgage ourselves to own one, become isolated and ensnared within its confine, frustrated by the others in our way while roads dominate and destroy everywhere we go and we ignore the irredeemable damage that it is doing to our planet, sitting in a traffic jam looking at advertisements of cars on empty country roads. The link between experience and discourse is sundered: everything is processed and packaged to a system totally detached from any living, breathing contact with natural life. We are bombarded with the publicized promise of a life totally missing from the reality around us and we console ourselves within a life of the mind: an advertising-created mirage that does not exist.

Further, removing ourselves from direct experience changes our relationship to time. Time becomes a linear race rather than a space within which we exist. Thus we become ever more separated from natural life and ourselves and live ever more in the world of ideas and concepts based on constructions of perception that, however useful and necessary, are partial and separate.

**Other ways of knowing**

*Our organisms have ways of intelligent understanding beyond words and conscious attention, ways that can handle an unknown number of variables at the same time."*

Watts (1979)

*"More purposive rationality unaided by such phenomena as art, religion, dream, and the like, is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life; and that its virulence springs specifically from the circumstance that life depends upon interlocking circuits of contingency, while consciousness can see only such short arcs of such circuits as human purpose may direct."*

Bateson (1981)

Instead of viewing rationalism as a useful tool for investigating the world, it became the only valid form of discourse within which the capacity for spiritual and mystical experience was devalued. We become highly skilled at manipulating information: sifting, seizing, rejecting, quantifying. So much that the mind becomes bogged down in information. The computational brain dominates and, in our impatience, we forget so many other forms of knowing: *"We have replaced secret wisdom with information."* (Moore 1992).

The awareness of mystery and a relationship to life beyond the capacity of pure reason is part of our inherent relationship to life and our intelligence that goes beyond rational thought. As Alan Watts (1988) wrote: *"the interests and goals of rationality are not those of man as a whole organism."*

Our existence is temporal, many dimensional: physical, spiritual, emotional, mental and memorial – a matrix of energy. A poetic dancing casting momentary insights of juxtapositions, throwing certain relations into relief. Being, becoming, changing are connected in the nature of time itself. Our power of intelligence involves heart, mind, body and soul. As several psychologists (Gilligan, 2008; Taylor, 2004) have pointed out, we have a capacity of spiritual and mystical experience: ways of knowing that goes beyond simple thought.

Yet our capacity to develop this transcending perspective relies much on our relationship to time: we need to be able to be aware of the present moment, yet we are caught on a treadmill of ever-increasing speed of time that engages the mind in a trap of action and reaction necessary for survival and thus we find neither the space, nor the silence, to become aware of ourselves. We also become further and further removed from the natural world in our mechanized, urban environments. The mind wants to label and move on: *"Ah, a beautiful sunset – I must remember to go the supermarket on the way home – must hand in that report in the morning – it my wife's birthday next week – what that fool in the car in front doing? – I'm so hungry – ah, my phone! – Yes, John; I'll organize a meeting – Another bombing on the radio..."* It is what James Joyce labelled 'the stream of consciousness'. This stream is part of our perception and reaction to the world around us; if we are aware of the stream and let it flow, it does not tie us down. Yet the constant bombardment of a cacophony of abstract stimuli: telephone, computer, digital sound leave no place for that awareness: the complexity and subtlety of natural life is lost. Ideas refer to ideas not to experience (Baudrillard, 1983). We lose contact with the natural world that formed us and thus with the very nature of Reality itself.

Techniques of prayer and meditation develop the ability stay in the moment and to be aware of sensation rather than judging it. To be open, rather than imposing our ideas. Awareness or Mindfulness, as expressed in Buddhist teaching, helps us to view experience in relation to our reaction to it, thus allowing us a distance that avoids judgement:

*"Let your awareness drop deep within you like a stone, sinking below the level of what words or acts can express... Breathe in deep and quiet... Open your consciousness to the deep web of relationship that underlies and interweaves all experience, all knowing."*

Macy (1983)

*"Hark! Listen to the song of the bird, the wind in the trees, the ocean's roar. Look at a tree, a falling leaf, a flower as if for the first time. You might suddenly make contact with Reality, with that Paradise from which we, having fallen from childhood, are excluded by our knowledge."*

Mello (1998)

*"Prayer is made perfect when the timeless is discovered. The Timeless is discovered through clarity of perception. Perception is made clear when it is disengaged from preconceptions and from all considerations of personal loss or gain. Then the miraculous is seen and the heart is filled with wonder."*

Mello (1998)

*"The man who sat on the ground in his tipi meditating on life and its meaning, accepting the kinship of all creatures and acknowledging unity with the universe of things was infusing into his being the true essence of civilization."*

Chief Luther Standing Bear (cit. McLuhan 1992)

– There are literally thousands of writings, from all cultures and all times that point to this central activity of awareness: a shift in perception that allows us to the process of life and ourselves as part of that whole.

### **The awareness of mystery**

*"Almost every spiritual tradition recognizes that a point comes when two things must happen: man must surrender his separate feeling "I", and must face the fact that he cannot know, that is define, the ultimate."*

Watts (1988)

There remains the eternal conundrum of the part trying to understand the whole, "caught in the form of limitation". For this we were imbued with body, mind, heart and soul; each has its own part to play in relating ourselves to the world, to our understanding: the body has direct intelligence, ways of understanding, and a capacity of awareness of the present that the mind forgets. Conscious thought recognizes recurring patterns that allow us to articulate form and stand back from constant change: yet the mind fixes form, separate from the whole. For the individual to become aware of the whole takes a process of transcendence that leads us from ourselves into another greater understanding: to become one with the universe.

We need other forms of perception to make this move outside ourselves and comprehend the patterns of the whole. Ironically, it is only through the giving up of self that the other can be comprehended.

We move into a realm where we can only proceed through mystery and metaphor.

The mystery woven into human life is here, beyond our selfishness; in the impulse of self towards other: in the part's awareness of the whole. The desire for transcendence of our human nature; to go beyond ourselves, beyond the limits of time, of space and of death. A shift of perspective that will change the world, a willingness to give up the security of the known for the unknown.

This takes us into realms of mystery beyond rationality. I believe that this capacity for transcendence is integrated into our nature: a perception that can free us from our myopic vision: an emotional and spiritual connection and a creative leap of imagination that takes us beyond ourselves.

Some call this realm God, others Tao, others Gaia. The Romantics sought to touch this mystery through the Sublime: a man on a mountaintop at the height of a storm, or in a graveyard at the full moon, is brought face to face with the smallness of his preoccupations and his limitations. The Buddhist monk approaches the same point from within; waiting until the chattering mind becomes still and existence becomes aware of essence at "the still point of the turning world".

Yet even here there are those that want to cling on to a proprietary brand of Truth: As Anthony Mello puts it (1998), *"It is not the diversity of our dogmas but our dogmatism that does the damage."* Truth exists beyond its expression in specific cultural form and this is perhaps the hardest thing for humans to accept and perhaps no issue has been responsible for so much conflict and war. We must look at belief in the cultural context that gave rise to it and not "mistake the finger for the moon"<sup>1</sup>.

*"We have a situation in which human beings, who must deal with each other, have vastly different views as to the nature of reality yet each one believes his or her own view to be the correct one since it is based on the microcosm of personal experience. And to make matters worse, most of us are not even aware of our own world views, much less the uniqueness of the experience from which they are arrived."*

Scott Peck (1978)

The simple truth is that if we are willing to accept the nature of our limitation, then we are open to others and treat them with respect and tolerance. Research shows that it is a sense of not being respected that leads to conflict and violence on an individual and global level (James Gilligan, 2001). Knowing that our ideas, beliefs and feelings are not absolutes, but part of a complex interactive dance, should teach us this respect and tolerance for others. Each person we meet can give us a new insight into Reality and into ourselves.

The path of Love, of true religion, is that of transcendence: of moving from an egocentric perception to embrace the whole of reality, to become one with the Other and the Universe. This is by nature mystic, since the individual is consumed into the whole.

### Love and Humility

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<sup>1</sup> "The sage points to the moon, the fool looks at the finger": Chinese proverb

## THE PATH OF LOVE

*"Understanding comes from humility, not the pride of knowledge."*

Tamaro (1996)

In these terms the path of life may be seen as that from self to other. The first impulse towards the other is educated by the heart: the long journey from selfishness to selflessness can be instructed by love in its myriad stages from desire: to possess other, through passion: to become one with another, to putting the wellbeing of other before one's own.

Love and imagination are the ingredients that allow the alchemy of transcendence; that permit us to pass the boundaries of our own circumscription. Human life is a journey away from our egocentric vision of the self as the centre of the universe. This journey can begin with love of another: from attachment and desire towards detachment and love. The first step may be when another's wellbeing: our partner or our children, becomes more important than our own.

Our first stirrings towards the mystery of another come through feelings that we do not understand: the overwhelming of our senses in the presence of another and a sense of abject emptiness when the object is absent. Desire and attachment draw us to the heights of a longing that consumes us. Yet, this state has no awareness of other: we are love-addicts that desire not another, but the state they engender. Only if, in passing through this state of attachment and desire, our being becomes entwined with the other can we hope to begin to learn the detachment from self that allows the seeds of Love to be sown. Not "I love you the image that I have of you", but "I will stand by you and allow you to be yourself" until two merge into one.

The moment of death is the ultimate giving up of self; life is a study for this moment of release that should be the inevitable final step of our journey, of giving ourselves back to the whole.

The path of Love is a journey from imposition to acceptance: from self to other to oneness with Life. It begins with humility: *"The only wisdom we can hope to achieve is humility, humility is endless."* T.S. Eliot (2001).

Through humility we may begin to listen; remain open rather than impose and thus learn respect for life, for the planet and for others. When we do violence, we always do it to ourselves since we are an integral part of the whole that is life:

*"A human being is part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to the affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."*

Albert Einstein (1988)

We are a small, finite part of the infinite and we lose this perspective at our peril.

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