

Some Clarity - Part 1 - Autumn 2021 – The gap between myself and my experience

I would like to share some recent clarity that has emerged for me. Please forgive my attempts to “define reality”. I know that on one level this is daft and just a story. On another level it feels necessary and creative to share my understanding, making the best “whole” I can, one that integrates and makes sense of my current experience. I hope / trust you find it useful.

I have long known that the heart of the process of facing and healing our trauma is around “making an object out of what we are subject to” (R. Kegan). An example of this is becoming aware of our identification with being a “victim”, this awareness allows the space to make those feelings an object of investigation and enquiry. For an even longer time I have known that coming back into the “here and now” is to “remember myself”, to become aware of being aware, conscious of being conscious. I have also long known that coming back into the sensation of my body, what is now known as “mindfulness”, is a great support to being, in this “here and now”. It may seem obvious, and I may be slow, but recently these understandings about my heart, head and body have integrated into a new whole, where I see that they are exactly the same process. Facing, accepting, and labelling my feelings is making them an object, coming into the “here and now” is making myself an object of my awareness / consciousness, sensing my body is making my physically sensed energetic existence an object to my awareness.

With this awareness it becomes ever clearer that somehow “I” exist separately from my functioning. That there is an “I” within me that is awareness, that is separate from my ego.

I see our ego as the sum of all the defensive structures we create around our trauma. The more trauma, the deeper the insecurity, the bigger the ego. Trauma causes us to split the connections between our head, heart, and body in order to maintain the unawareness necessary to keep the hurt, pain, fear or distress of that trauma repressed. This leads to essentially defensive relationship to our lives; it also leads to uneven development because we become identified with just one part of ourselves, our head, heart, or body. Either we become over-intellectual, identified with our thoughts, with the blaming and self-justificatory “chatter” of our heads with its assumptions, prejudices, denials, and daydreams. Or we become over anxious / emotional, identified, and believing every feelings, caught in “victim mode”. Or we become obsessed, or completely disconnected, from our bodies with its needs and demands. Any movement that exists between these parts of ourselves is characterised by disassociated “Jekyll and Hyde” like jumps between them. Here, our heart, head and body are closed, and we can’t meet what is real because of the depth of identification with our dream / nightmare. Here it is very difficult for an aware, integrated “I” to emerge into existence, it is lost in the conflict and noise of the plethora of different ego “I”s competing for attention.

However, we can, and do heal and grow and develop. Fundamentally because we want to. This wish it seems, is deep in our souls, in our genes, in the evolutionary nature of life itself in some way. The mechanism for this process is one of becoming aware of ourselves, through gaining self-knowledge and understanding. This requires us to, as above, “make objects out of what we are subject to”. It is through this process that we can start to see, face, question and eventually understand what is driving us to be the way we are. This is the door to self-compassion for our wounded and very human selves, it is the door to our authenticity and, eventually, to our freedom.

When we can connect two parts of ourselves there starts to be the possibility that I can make something of an object out of my experience, one part can become aware of the other. It is not

however, until we can manage to heal some of our trauma and achieve some integration of our head, heart, and body, that the whole can start to become greater than the sum of its parts and our non-egoic “I” can emerge into a more visible existence.

This process of becoming aware is the start of “Waking Up”. It is the process through which we can see the extent of the mechanical nature of our functioning, how everything flows from cause and effect with very little real choice in the unfolding of our lives. It is also the process that starts to free us, because with awareness we start to have the possibility of a tiny amount of choice. Then there is something in us that has “woken up”, an “I” that is separate from my usual identification with the trauma induced “story of myself”. In my experience we need to do a lot of work to face and heal our trauma before the pressure of identification can ease enough for this “I” to emerge with any consistency or clarity.

Now, with this clarity, I can see the direction of my journey more clearly. I can see that when we are free enough to integrate this process of “making an object out of what we are subject to”, into our daily life, we are beginning the stage of development where we can more directly work towards transcending our ego (whilst not denying it). There is an “I” able to direct our work, our ego’s defensiveness has lost its grip in terms of keeping us asleep, distracted, and identified. The ancient Chinese “Ten Oxherding Pictures” is a wonderful depiction of the stages of our development, and what I am discussing here is the sixth and seventh stage, called “Riding the Ox back home” and “Forgetting the Ox, the person rests alone”. (Wikipedia – I also wrote a piece about these pictures comparing them to Wilber’s “stage” map, see <https://jimrobinsoncouk.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/ox-hearding-pictures.pdf>)

I glimpse now a dawning sense that “I” am not in control of my life or life in general. That at some level Consciousness, Love and Energy are living through me. These are the transpersonal (or spiritual, for want of a better word) dimensions of our head, heart, and body, respectively. The higher / deeper dimension of our “head” is around our awareness of awareness, our connection with the silence of now as well as our ability to understand. With our heart this all about our connection to unconditional Love, and in our bodies to sensing its energy and life force. Each exists beyond all the noise and identifications of our ego deep in the “here and now”. So, this sense is a feeling that each of these “dimensions” has a force towards expression that is not mine, that has nothing to do with my familiar controlling egoic sense of myself.

Paradoxically, it also becomes crystal clear that I am totally responsible for this “story” of me, and for waking up from it. All this supports my wish to live increasingly in this new reality, here I am freer, my heart and body, and mind, are more open, I want to take full responsibility for myself, for becoming free. Just writing these sentences is helpful in clarifying where I am and what I want.

So, I now find myself in a place where I can usefully engage in challenging myself to change some deep-seated habits. This is something that needs to be undertaken without any “shoulds” whatsoever, as an experiment that tests and builds our will. Such struggles are inevitably full of “failure” to start with, as it is very hard to change deeply rooted habits. The prize though is that the struggle itself facilitates the integration of the self, slowly building a more integrated and cohesive “I”. Obviously this needs to be done with as much self-forgiveness and in ways that increasingly align us with the transpersonal depths of ourselves, rather than feed our ego.

To try this, before this stage in development, is to simply get caught into ego-games, or into unwinnable internal conflicts with our “shoulds”. (As Perls said about such battles “the underdog always wins”). This is why we need to first undo our “shoulds” and meet ourselves as we are. Before

this stage, such “work” is counterproductive because we have no real idea of what part of us is motivating us to do what.

I now trust life at a deeper level, a trust that is informed by my understanding of the transpersonal “Goodness, Beauty and Truth” of life. This is reflected in what Gestalt Therapy has always known, that the underlying structure of all of us has this wonderful orientation towards growth, wholeness, and freedom. The proof of this is evident in another truth, that every one of our “problems” really is an opportunity for our growth and development. Our ability to live this amazing truth, depends on, as above, being able to master “making objects out of what we are subject to”, making our experience an object of investigation, of self-reflection.

This process of coming into relationship with our here and now experience, of facing and accepting and understanding our “what is”, is how we heal our wounds and dismantle the defensive dream / nightmare that we constructed in an attempt to keep repressed our hurt, pain, distress, and fear. As many have said, we live in a dream of “separation”, and when we “wake up” we realise we were dreaming. By “waking up” we move towards living in a new reality, and when we get past the experience of being painfully conscious of the depth and pervasiveness of our insecurity, we can with patience and perseverance, become increasingly connected to, and supported by, the transpersonal dimensions of ourselves. By the Consciousness, Love and Energy that constitutes the very ground of our being. As Rumi put it, “we can’t aim for Love, we can only work to remove the obstacles within us to Love”.

Part two of this (to follow) will look into the nature of our transpersonal / spiritual experience, this “ground of our being”, along with examining the pitfalls around “spiritual bypassing”, and the “ego-traps”, we inevitably fall into.

Jim Robinson