

Eternal Optimism

Fifty years ago I was nineteen and in a mess. The previous two to three years I had been reading Ouspensky, Alan Watts, Krishnamurti, I'd travelled the hippy trail overland to India and been in an audience with the Dali Lama, I'd been meditating, I'd had an amazing "satori" experience which lasted a few weeks. I thought I was part of a societal revolution, which in one way I was, but not quite in the way I thought. However, despite all this I ended up down a negative self-destructive rabbit hole.

At times I felt wonderfully embraced by the historic significant shift in societal consciousness that was happening, as well as naively trying to find a solution to my angst. It seems that in this I was reflecting the zeitgeist of the times. The cultural revolution underway was fuelled by the humanistic "third wave" in psychology, together with an opening to the wisdom traditions of the East.

Perl's, Goodman, Maslow, Rodgers, Assagioli, Laing and many others built the new ground of humanistic psychology. Alan Watts, Krishnamurti, and a whole host of Eastern "gurus" brought the wisdom of the East to the West. It was a powerful revolutionary crucible of change and I was deeply saddened that this flowering of a new consciousness, which glimpsed the potential for Love to create a radically different society, seemed to fade so fast and so hard. In hindsight it was inevitable, there was too much escapism and projection, there wasn't the sufficient ground of understanding of the psychology of trauma, to enable love to blossom. Society, just like myself, wasn't grown up enough, didn't have enough self-knowledge, to avoid getting lost in all the compensatory compulsions that flow from trauma. We didn't understand how beneath the shackles of narrow minded post-war conventional morality, there was so much trauma, and that naively just binning those shackles wasn't enough.

But the point I want to make is that the understanding and awareness of our enormous potential for human development, that emerged from this "revolutionary crucible" of humanistic psychology and spirituality, is still relevant. It is still true and even more practical today because of our increased knowledge and awareness, especially of trauma.

Over the recent decades it has become clear that there are stages to our human development (e.g. Wilber), and the definite sequential stages point along our evolutionary path towards the wholeness and freedom we are capable of finding. Our rapidly expanding understanding of trauma opens up this path in a very practical way, showing us that it is these "obstacles within us" (Rumi) that block our development and connection to Love. It is through these stages that we travel towards consciously embodying Consciousness, Love and Sensation, towards embodying the profound "being, in the here and now" that is always possible.

The founders of humanistic psychology knew that the force towards health and wholeness within us is enormous. What is now so clear, is that this force is fundamental to Life and the Universe. The leading edge of developing consciousness around the globe is moving beyond modern and postmodern "stages" towards the "Integral" stages that understand how this teleological direction of the Universe is towards enabling the realisation and embodiment of the non-dual Whole. (e.g. see "The Web of Meaning" by Jeremy Lent, "A New Republic of the Heart" by Terry Pattern, "Religion of Tomorrow" by Ken Wilber, "Galileo's Error" by Philip Goff, "The Matter with Things" by McGilchrist)

Our real problem though is that we are running out of time to avoid the approaching environmental disasters. It is the volume of trauma still in the world that prevents us from being able to address our crisis, and it looks as though there is not enough time to heal this sufficiently. Indeed, with the current war in Europe it looks as though we are digging our hole ever deeper. All those causing trauma, all the fascist, dictators and power hungry of every ilk, are driven by trauma.

We have to recognise though that none of us has control, that we have no real option but to trust in the unfolding of what will be. Whilst we do what we can, any one person's ability to shift societal consciousness towards facilitating the radical re-structuring that our environmental crisis requires, that undoes our gross social injustice, and provides new meaning, is minimal. But we also need to remember that every small step towards personal freedom is a step in this direction, every extra chink of consciousness, every extra gram of love, every embodied sensation connecting us with the energy of Life, all does change the world. We have to believe and trust in this, otherwise we are in danger of being overwhelmed and defeated.

The forces at work on a global level are truly enormous and will unfold as they do. So much of our current creativity is orientated towards technology, it is the deep default habit of the modern and post-modern perspectives, and I trust it will make a significant contribution to our survival. But I agree with many (e.g. Marianne Williamson) that articulate how we need to open our hearts to Love, (essentially through the doorway of self-compassion) and let the creativity that flows from Love inform and support the wider revolution we need in societal consciousness. We know that money does not make anyone happy, things don't make us happy. The current craziness of Tory politicians bidding to become PM promising tax cuts to fuel ever more growth and consumption is as mad as someone trying to put out their burning home, by throwing buckets of petrol on it.

People crave love, connection, value and meaning and it must be possible for societies across the globe to change in ways that increasingly meet these real desires, without it "costing the earth". I also agree with Elliot Benjamin (S&S Vol 50) that humanistic psychology is profoundly political. From it flows the clear need for the deepening and broadening of democracy across the globe. George Monbiot's article (Guardian 13th July 2022) about Bookchin's "Communalism" is perhaps pointing the way.

Duane Elgin (Choosing Earth), Catherine Ingram (Facing Extinction) and many climate scientists argue that some level of global catastrophe is now inevitable, the falling dominoes of "tipping points" are well under way. The interesting thing about Elgin's thesis is his argument that we still have some choice about the what and how of what will emerge from this coming awfulness. Maybe we will be overwhelmed and traumatised, with the regressive forces unleashed by our fight, flight, freeze responses condemning us to a negative vortex of annihilation. Yet, with the increase in global consciousness that is undoubtedly happening, we might yet avoid the worst, and may even eventually emerge into a new and healthier phase in humanity's history. The point is that every effort, every increase in awareness, every opening of our mind, our heart and body, is still needed now, is still meaningful and has never been more vital.

But what are the values, principles and philosophies that enable people to find satisfaction, happiness and their creativity. As a psychotherapist I see every day how it is the trauma induced attachment to our negative victim stories that make our lives miserable. We are all, it seems to me, insecure to some degree, and therefore defensive and unable to live fully in the here and now. It is our defeatedness that deprives us of hope and optimism and creativity. Modernism's prescription of anti-depressants and Post-modernism's tendency towards nihilistic meaningless, do not help.

However, once we understand that this defeatedness, this negativity and identification with victimness arises from trauma, we start to enter a new world of understanding where everything can be seen as process, and how this process is always meaningful. From this perspective the world ceases to be a fixed thing against which we are powerless and bound to fail. We can start to see that there are developmental pathways, both personally and societally, towards increasing freedom and being.

We firstly need to see and accept the level of trauma in society, and this is in many ways the hardest task. One of the most difficult things for those diving into therapy is to face the depth of their

woundedness and the inevitable and constant insecurity that flows from it. Once this is achieved however we can more fluidly remember and reconnect to how everything is process and whatever I am experiencing at this moment is meaningful and creative in the unfolding of this process. Every problem can become a doorway to further healing and freedom. The self is teleologically orientated towards health, healing and wholeness. Life is not random and meaningless, but beautifully structured at every level to facilitate increasing complexity and simplicity, consciousness, and realisation.

The story that makes sense to me is that the force behind the creation of the universe wants us to heal, it wants us to integrate and develop into a conscious whole, to become its realised self in form, to whatever extent we can. It needs us to participate in realising the amazing Beauty, Goodness and Truth of this wholeness. This works through integrating and embodying the three ways we have of relating to the world, our head, heart and body. Each has its connection to the transpersonal dimension of Consciousness, Love and Energy/Sensation and, these form a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. We call this the Tao, God, Brahma, etc.

There is here the profound paradox of human choice though. Our only real choice is whether to participate in the process of the universe's desire to realise itself, or not. It is both a choice and not a choice at the same time. Our deepest nature encourages, but does not dictate, that we find our "yes". For realisation to mean anything there has to be this existential level choice (which is why taking responsibility for ourselves is so crucial). But then, saying "no" is simply to allow the unconscious defeatedness and negativity that flows from trauma to win. "Yes" is the only choice that corresponds to our true nature.

In the end, complete determinism would make the extraordinary experiment that is our universe, meaningless. The universe has laws that govern its processes, physics and chemistry are the same all over, but even at this level, things are by no means totally mechanistic. It is Life however, with its extraordinary creative force overcoming entropy (see Lent) that is so clearly not mechanistic. Life's creativity eventually enables consciousness to emerge, and then human self-realisation with its consciousness of Consciousness and ever more embodied Love and Energy. Yes, it all takes a very, very, long time to evolve, but this must also be the story throughout the universe's billions of galaxies, each with their billions of planets where life must surely exist. From this, it seems obvious that Life's role in the whole process, and our place in Life, is crucial and special.

So, congratulations to AHP and Self & Society for keeping the humanistic flame alive. For keeping open for so long, the essentially optimistic vision of human life and its potential. For example, I loved Jill Hall's (S&S Vol 50) interview, where she synthesises so well the humanistic, existential and spiritual dimensions of life. This is ever more needed today to counter the defeatist and nihilistic tendencies that emerge from our growing post-modern consciousness, which is sadly still deeply influenced by trauma's negativity.

At a societal level we still need to understand and integrate more generally what humanistic psychology has always known, that fundamentally humans are inherently "Good, Beautiful and True". We need to integrate the truth that we are developmental beings inescapably invited to journey towards some sort of absolute Beingness. If we keep our hearts, minds and bodies open, we are on this journey, which is truly wonderful. We don't need to worry about how far we'll get, we can trust in the staggering Creativity that is this Universe unfolding.

Jim Robinson – Autumn 2022