

## **The Pandemic and Awakening: some thoughts on the Coronavirus experience.**

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As Wendy Hollway discussed in her April and May Climate Psychology Alliance newsletters, it is difficult not to see the connection between the challenges of the virus and climate change issues.

While we are all still in a state of shock with the global lockdown and have only just begun to think about what it all means, we are becoming increasingly aware that fundamental changes are taking place at all levels and there is no going back to “normal life”.

At the same time there is a sense of relief for some of us that Coronavirus has broken through the unreality of our materialistic and high-consuming way of living. Who would have thought that a micro-entity could be responsible for confining the whole human race to their homes, leaving our cities deserted and quiet, emptying the skies of aircraft etc? It is impressive. What Greens have been campaigning about for decades, i.e. the reduction in global carbon emissions, the virus has achieved in a matter of weeks.

To be certain, the changes will bring much suffering. In addition to the mounting death count, the dislocation of life could be immense. Nor do we know how people will respond to this. It's possible things could get worse. Of course, the instincts of desire and fear that are in all of us, including, particularly, in the world's rich one percent, persist and will re-emerge when we return to a more normal life. But pessimism can be self-fulfilling. Human nature may be evolving. *We shouldn't close our minds to the possibility of human progress.*

The pandemic could be a step towards an awakening. There has been a dramatic emotional release during the past weeks, whether of true grief at the loss of so many lives and fear for what the future may bring, or, in addition, the altruism, kindness and sheer creative resourcefulness, even joy, accompanying it. Could it be that this also has implications for our psychotherapy traditions? We point out the short-sighted denial about climate change but perhaps we have more understanding, resilience and resourcefulness than we know.

## **Death awareness**

Coronavirus is responsible for taking many lives. While this has caused great grief and loss, we should be aware that death - like birth - is not the opposite of life, but a part of it. Death is currently our essential taboo, perhaps our greatest denial. We forget that 200,000 people die every day on the planet - one and a half million a week, over seventy million every year! As the ancient philosophers reminded us, as soon as we are born our path leads to death, and its ever-present possibility is never more than a breath away. Death awareness, as Montaigne wrote in his essay, "To philosophise is to learn how to die", helps us, paradoxically, not to be afraid of dying. It seems we have "unlearnt" how to die, which is why we are so traumatised by it.

## **Economic changes**

Could we be seeing the beginning of the end of neoliberal ideology and practice? Boris Johnson doesn't like the word "austerity" and tells us now there **is** such a thing as society. Moreover, government spending is up like never before. None of this, however, implies there is a real ethical dimension to government practice. Or an understanding that the "free market" is not really free.

The rationale for the neoliberal view of the workings of the market economy is to be found in the concept of "the invisible hand", as described in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. The invisible hand, in its economic identity, is assumed not only to be the essence of the free market but also the mechanism of industrial capitalism. Interestingly, Smith was originally a professor of moral philosophy and published his first great book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1759 <sup>1</sup> and it wasn't until 1776 that *The Wealth of Nations*, which grew out of the earlier book, appeared. Would it be too fanciful to ask whether the invisible hand, as conceived by Adam Smith, refers as much to the faculty of "sympathy" within the human mind and heart? Sympathy, the feeling that most connects us and, along with pity and compassion, the ground of ethics, was for him a fundamental passion and is to be found in everybody: "The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it".

Despite the influence of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in the eighteenth century - by 1790 it had reached its fifth edition - *The Wealth of Nations* has, as Amartya Sen points out in his introduction to the modern Penguin edition of *Moral Sentiments*, been interpreted without reference to the framework of thought of the earlier book, “to the detriment of economics as a subject”. Could we now be reassessing the nature of modern economics? Could we, to adapt Bill Clinton’s famous election catchphrase, suggest it’s no longer just the economy, stupid?

## **Political changes**

The central pillar in neoliberal ideology is the notion of minimal government, originally followed by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan from their reading of F. A. Hayek, who tended to view the tyranny of Soviet Communism as his example of socialism. The Thatcher and Reagan neoliberal practice of withdrawal from responsible government must be in question. The failure of the politics of economic austerity and the dismantling of local government is now laid bare. The present Tory government in the U.K., for instance, are now having actually to govern, against their neoliberal ideological instincts. The next year or so will be a test of their ability to do so, after decades of withdrawal from governmental responsibility.

## **Austerity and Coronavirus**

There is an alternative view of austerity to the economic one - psychological and spiritual austerity. In Asian cultures it is known by the Sanskrit word *tapas*, which is commonly associated with the ascetic practices of yogis and gnanis in secluded places. But in Buddhism it is thought of more generally as meditative practice, accompanied by right thinking, right livelihood and right ethics, and can be followed by anyone. It is not an extreme practice of renunciation but more of a “middle way” approach and doesn’t imply a vow of poverty. In fact it is not recommended for people suffering from poverty, hunger or deprivation. True austerity of this kind cannot result from coercion.

A better word would perhaps be simplicity. In 1981 the visionary activist, Duane Elgin, published *Voluntary Simplicity*, a guide to sustainable living. <sup>2</sup> So popular has it been that he has produced two revised editions, the second in 2010. It is not a book about living in deprivation and poverty but about living in balance. It begins by describing the changes

that more and more people are making in their everyday lives as a response to the dissatisfaction they feel about the materialism and high consumption of our carbon-fuelled modern society. Voluntary simplicity is a way of living according to the values of ecological awareness, frugal consumption and personal growth. Elgin believes these changes portend a potential revolution in our way of life, and a change in consciousness along with the practical changes. He is also aware of the great dangers to all life if we don't embrace simplicity.

Interestingly, the science writer, John Gribbin, has also written about *Deep Simplicity* in the context of Chaos and Complexity theory. <sup>3</sup> In his introduction, entitled "The Simplicity of Complexity", he describes how he was still busily writing about "the old science" in the eighties when Prigogine and Stengers published their classic *Order out of Chaos* and James Gleick, his *Chaos*. Gribbin struggled to understand the complexity of complexity theory until he realised that it is based on two simple premises - the sensitivity of any system to its starting conditions, and the principle of feedback. Understand these and you have a key to the staggering complexity of structures that are built up from them. It was James Lovelock who explained this to him. But Gribbin quotes Murray Gell-Mann, echoing Richard Feynman, that the complicated behaviour of the world we see around us, including the living world, is merely "surface complexity arising out of deep simplicity".

To me this raises questions for us: Is there a deep psychological simplicity we have missed, behind all the theoretical complexities of our diverse therapeutic models and modalities? Is there a unifying human spirit after all? And, if so, how do we begin to realise it? Some might argue that psychology is a therapeutic science and the idea of "awakening" is outside its discipline, but others appreciate that exploring the existential nature of mind, as, for instance, in the dialogue between Western sciences and buddhism, can also be of great therapeutic value. <sup>4</sup> Sam Harris, the neuroscientist and writer, also takes up this theme in his book, *Waking Up*. <sup>5</sup>

I wonder if the way we have to live under the lockdown will bring Elgin's simplicity revolution nearer. Of course there must be changes to traditional industries, particularly those heavily dependent on carbon sources of energy. Aircraft companies and the car industry are likely to be transformed, given that people's travelling habits will change. The tourist industry will also have to make fundamental adjustments. People are now talking of what kind of life will emerge as the lockdown is lifted. What would make the most

significant difference is if our leaders, not just political but leaders in all walks of life - the “leading edge” - would embrace simplicity voluntarily, providing an example for all to follow. Jacinda Ardern, the prime minister of New Zealand, is just such an example.

## **Change of consciousness**

It has been so interesting to listen to the personal lockdown experiences of everyone. It's also been refreshing to hear more from people other than politicians, whether the experts in the medical and other specialities, the “front-line” staff in the NHS and home-care sector, or we “ordinary” folk in our own homes. It's as if the conviction and authority of everybody's voices have been stifled for too long, and the virus has provided an opportunity for people to speak up. This is surely the voice of democracy working. Accounts have been so diverse but have also brought us together, a truly shared experience.

But there has also been a change in our consciousness of the ideas of space and time and this may be quite fundamental. Take space, for example. There has been a growing awareness, among Greens in particular, that globalisation, as conceived in its economic form, is so ecologically damaging. The “globalisation” that allows us in the developed world to jump on a plane and visit whatever corner of the planet we wish to has surely come to an end. Even more powerfully the pandemic has led us to question the globalised supply chains that bring food to the table, clothes to the shops, car parts to the assembly line and so on. This involves massive carbon emissions, far more than flying for tourism

“Stay at home” is a phrase that will resound into the future but staying at home for a while is not so bad for some. To deprive our bodies of commuting daily - or flying across continents regularly - can be a relief, and good for our physical and mental health. When we do travel it will be much more of an event. Besides, we can live and act locally at the same time as thinking globally, something Greens have always recommended. “Space” is now a mental more than a physical construct. We will find we can go places in our minds that are always denied to our bodies.

As for our sense of time, lockdown has been a revelation for those of us fortunate enough to have the means to survive without too much anxiety. When you have an empty diary one day is like another, the week and weekend hardly distinguishable. Time truly does

stretch out, without an obvious beginning or ending, waiting for us to structure it. If we don't finish a thing one day, there will always be tomorrow. We can go as slow or fast as we like. It's a new experience, almost as if time is infinite, timeless in fact. We know the lockdown will give way eventually to some kind of bounded "normal" life again, but what we do with our own time - which we may well have more of - may well be different for our experience of the lockdown.

## **Psychological implications**

While the virus has threatened the whole structure of the modern capitalist system, it has challenged us to review our experience of ourselves as human beings. Many people have reported a new feeling about nature. Certainly nature herself has had some breathing space from us. Every morning I take an early stroll through a small nearby wood and have the distinct feeling that the birdsong has become louder and more exuberant. Whether this is actually so, or more a case of my hearing being more sensitive, I am not sure. Perhaps it is both, evidence perhaps that we are becoming aware that "nature" is within, as well as all about us.

The experience of lockdown has had its ironies and paradoxes. At the same time as we have been asked to self-isolate and distance regulate we have become acutely aware of how interconnected we are physiologically - a challenge to the notion of the separate self which underpins the possessive individualism of our modern market economy. The lockdown experience has also helped us to realise how inter-connected we are, mentally and emotionally. That interdependency extends, of course, beyond interpersonal relationships to the wider ecology, including nature, the whole planet and living universe. This leads to thinking about the "ecological self", even the "ecology of mind".

In addition the lockdown has been an opportunity to reflect. We've had the chance to think about what we are usually too busy to give time to - what the sixth century Chinese Buddhist master, Chih-i called, in the title of his book on meditative practice, "The Great Stopping and Seeing".<sup>6</sup> The aim for Chih-i is to "stop" delusion and "see" truth, critically the truth about ourselves. Clearly, our attempts to address the climate and ecological emergency will fail unless we change within ourselves at the same time.

Our scientists tell us, amazingly, that the matter known to us through our senses is only 4% of what there is. The rest - 96% - is “dark matter” and “dark energy”, which are a complete mystery to them. You could say that science is waking up to its profound ignorance, which some might claim to be the beginning of real knowledge. One wonders in turn what percentage of our human nature we understand.

Under-standing ourselves is not just something we can “know”. It is not just a cognitive function. It is what we are, something we can explore and experience by going beyond our minds. Heidegger thought of philosophy as “the un-concealing of being”. It is a meditative act, a form of reflection and mindfulness, a means to awakening. Surely therapy can have the same aspiration. Exploring the reflective self is the door to discovering who we really are.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Introduction by Amartya Sen, edited with notes by Ryan Patrick Hanley, London: Penguin, 2009 (1759).

<sup>2</sup> Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Towards a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*, Second Revised Edition, New York: Harper, 2010 (1981).

<sup>3</sup> John Gribbin, *Deep Simplicity: Chaos, Complexity and the Emergence of Life*, London: Penguin, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> These issues are discussed in a variety of contributions in Gay Watson, Stephen Batchelor, and Guy Claxton (editors) *The Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Science and Our Day-to-Day Lives*, London: Rider, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Harris, *Waking Up: Searching for spirituality without religion*, London: Black Swan/Transworld, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Chih-I, *Stopping and Seeing: A Comprehensive Course in Buddhist Meditation*, translated by Thomas Cleary, Boston: Shambhala, 1997