

Occasional Note #7

Living Experience as Spiritual Practice

In this Occasional Note I want to write a bit about an idea which has been a foundation of my work over the years, but which I do not often make explicit. This is the idea that we mature as human beings primarily through the full living of our given experience, whatever it is, whether we understand it, or not, whether we like it, or not, and that embedded in this living experience is the substance and nurture our soul needs in order to incarnate fully and realize its/our gifts here on earth. From this perspective living our experience fully is, thus, not only the foundation of psycho-spiritual development, the touchstone that we return to again and again as the major means to support the process of human maturation, but also in its intensity and truth, moment to moment and over time, the means by which we realize, through a differentiated and integrated psyche and personality, the essence and core qualities/values of our souls. Our living experience is the actual path of our spiritual life on earth.

I also in this Note want to link this idea of living experience as the ground of psycho-spiritual development and spiritual maturity to the current emergence of a new spirituality -- one that supports soul-embodiment and acknowledges the "rapture" of being fully alive here and now on earth as the fruit of sustained spiritual practice. This is a spirituality that sees the soul as "happiest on earth" and seeking its home here, so to speak, not in heaven, or nirvana, or wherever else. It is a spirituality that includes the body and senses as sacred, and embraces our suffering and death as holy means of soul-realization. It is a spirituality that sees the planet, and all beings who share its beauty, as sacred, and one that is at work in all of us, whether we know it, or not, cooperate with it, or not, toward a world awakening and transformation of consciousness that can lead to healing and health at all levels of our living. It is a spirituality that sees the earth as heaven, and which affirms the means to union with all beings and the Universe to be through the full realization of our unique and particular lives. This spirituality is emerging as the planet "shrinks" and as we begin to see more clearly that the human species needs to find a way to live here on earth together-- a way that both affirms our commonality **and** the myriad differences that exist between nations, cultures, individuals. It is a spirituality, independent of any one religion and rooted in a process which works in, and through, our daily experience, whether we are religious, or not, toward these ends.

In linking these two ideas I am proposing that we can view learning to live our particular human experience fully, no matter what it is, as a spiritual practice, and that this "practice of living experience" lays the foundation, not only of psychological maturity, but also of soul-realization and spiritual wisdom and strength. We can view learning to accept and embrace every dimension of our human experience as the very path of awakening to our true nature and to the full expression of who we most deeply are. We don't have to leave some aspects of our human experience behind, or cut them off, in order to mature spiritually, but

rather we need to enter each and every experience fully and live each for what it can give us of our soul.

We do this, not blindly, but with the perspective of the "I", or center, or with mindfulness, whatever the term, and with the transcendence, or disidentification, which is part of that perspective. We do this by choice and with awareness. But we do not avoid any experience, or judge it, or reject it, for in each experience we assume is embedded something the soul needs in order to incarnate and mature on earth. Terence, the Roman poet puts it, *homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto* ("I am human, and therefore nothing human is alien from me"). All experience, even the darkest, is holy in that it can be learned from and transformed into spiritual force. There is no split between the human and the spiritual in this practice; living experience fully is seen as the root, and route, of spiritual development and every detail has a place and function in this process and path. In this view the soul, in fact, needs the full spectrum of experience in order to grow, to incarnate, to ripen here on earth, and we, therefore, cultivate our souls best by staying with whatever experience we are having and living it fully with awareness and presence, and by not trying to avoid it, or change it into something else.

In the first part of this Note I want to describe the "cycle of immediate experience" and how it can be used to support the process of maturation and this idea of spiritual practice. Then, in the second part, I will reflect on "living experience as a spiritual practice" and its fruits in our very human lives.

The Cycle of Immediate Experience

This is a way to conceive staying close to our experience moment to moment--to live it fully. The idea is that there is a cycle of immediate experience which folds back on itself again and again in a rhythmic and cyclic way. This cycle has phases, and by staying close to these phases within the process, we come closer to our true living experience. This idea is drawn from Gestalt Therapy and also from meditative practice, and is a way of tracking, and cooperating with, the natural movement of the soul within our immediate experience.

The starting point is what we have called the "truth" of immediate experience, i.e. whatever is happening in the present moment in body, feelings, and mind. We train ourselves and those we work with to be in the present and to be aware of this experience and report how it shifts and changes moment to moment. The assumption here is that this truth, no matter what it is, connects the person, or ourselves, to the process by which the soul is working to transform psyche and personality so as to be able to express more fully and forcefully through them. This truth changes moment to moment, and the practice of presence keeps us in the Now, so to speak, and in touch with this process as it flows from one experience to the next. This practice with the cycle includes as well observing and experiencing distractions, and patterns of disconnection, rooted in trauma and identification--ways in which we are disconnected-- and, paradoxically, as we include them, their very truth connects us immediately to the soul process again. The trick is to stay close to the living experience, whatever it is, and trust that this is what is needed, even if we do not understand it, even if it is painful and uncomfortable, even if it is

frightening. It is in the truth of our experience, moment to moment, that the soul resides, grows, and incarnates in our flesh, blood, and bone.

We often do not understand our immediate experience, nor can we control it, and it often appears to be chaotic and non-rational from the point of view of our mind and particular set of personal identifications. The second phase of the cycle, therefore, is the experience of chaos and not-knowing, of letting go of the need to understand and control and simply live the experience as it is. This takes courage and practice, for often the experience is disturbing the familiar ways we know ourselves to be in the world. We need to learn to let go to the unknown and seemingly chaotic experience in order to cooperate with the soul. We need to learn to let go of what we think is happening, or should happen, and experience what is actually happening, and stay with that. Faith helps here, and practice, and in time slowly we begin to discover that, when we do this, something new and useful emerges and we experience being more connected to ourselves.

What is emerging from this seeming chaos is an experience of a deep order and meaning, which may not make sense to some parts of us, but resonates with us in an essential way so that we recognize the validity of this experience, even if we at first resisted it. The chaos of the previous phase is, in fact, orderly in its own way, not in ours, and it brings us more than we could ever imagine when we are able to stay with it and live into the deep order /meaning that emerges from it. A common example of this is dreams, which at first do not "make sense", but as we work with them, their deeper order and meaning is revealed. This is also true of our waking experience, when we trust and work with it in this way.

From this experience of deep order, in turn, arises new understanding. Our minds now recognize and can hold the pattern and learning that have arisen from the sheer living of the experience and the bearing of the chaos until meaning emerged. We can now think and reflect on how this learning can be applied in our life. The mind is as useful here as it is an obstacle earlier in the cycle. We need to "leave our minds and come to our senses" as Fritz Perls said, in the earlier phase **and** here we need to examine our experience with our mind and come to understand it so that we can make choices and act on what we have learned.

The next phase is choice/responsibility. Based on this experience of chaos/deep order and consequent reflection/understanding we make a choice as to how to be, or what to do. We choose to respond and take responsibility for our increased understanding. Here intention and the will enters the cycle, for choice and response leads to action of some sort which grounds and amplifies the learning within the context of daily life. Without choice/ responsibility and action the work with sheer experience remains sterile and ungrounded. Understanding, choice/responsibility, and action are those phases in the cycle that bring about real change at the personal level psychologically and move a person tangibly further on their path spiritually. Experience alone is not sufficient to do this. It is requisite and essential as a ground for understanding, choice/responsibility, and action-- vitally important, as I have said above, but the cycle moves toward completion through choice/responsibility and action. Note that responsibility is based in response, rooted in new understanding arising from experience. It is not an obligation

imposed on experience, but rather an organic outcome of paying close attention to the truth of experience.

The last phase of the cycle is rest/presence. A certain wave of the process has passed and we rest, waiting for the next wave, so to speak. Of course, our choices and action have brought new experience to us, and so, as we rest, we observe how we are now, and this leads to the beginning of the next cycle, again with awareness of sheer experience-- what is happening in the present moment, what the soul needs for us to touch and work with now in order to grow. And so we go around again and again and again: experience--chaos--deep order--understanding--choice/responsibility--action--rest/presence--experience....

These cycles can be minutes, or decades, long. The time/space frame will vary as to the learning needed. But the cycles are "nested" in a way that each "small" cycle contributes to the "large" cycle, so that all that is needed is to stay in the present moment and work with whatever emerges, knowing that at some point we will know how that experience is related to the large cycles, and to the cycle of our life time, and perhaps lifetimes. Assagioli was fond of saying that "a lifetime is a day in the life of the soul"- one cycle of human experience. **And, at the same time, every moment has the whole Universe in it, if we live it fully.**

The Context of Being

The context for this "cycle of immediate experience" is Being. Being holds becoming (the phases and the waves), and it is to Being that we return again and again as the container for our experience. The soul is in essence being, and you could say, from this perspective, that the soul works on its becoming through the cycle I have described above, while at the same time always remaining rooted in Being. We are, in essence, Being, and, as the cycles proceed, we experience more and more this spiritual root, which connects us with all beings and the Universe, while, at the same time, we grow through becoming into our distinct and unique selves. In this way we come in time to experience both the universality of our existence and its particularity--how we are both joined with all other living beings as one **and** we are uniquely different from all others and uniquely ourselves. You have seen this quotation before.

"The stunning paradox of human spiritual maturity is that, as we become one with all creation, we also at the same time become completely and uniquely ourselves"

Being holds becoming as this process proceeds through the cycles of immediate experience, and in this way the soul increasingly finds its/our home on the planet, is embodied fully, and comes to experience, as Joseph Campbell has said, "the rapture of being fully alive" here/now on earth.

The cycle of immediate experience, if we follow and live it moment to moment and over time, becomes a flow of living experience within us, a stream of rich and energetic physical, emotional, and mental vitality through which the soul can both learn how to be on earth and express its/our gifts more and more fully. **The**

paradox, and challenge, is that through living our immediate life fully we mature spiritually. There is no separate category of "spiritual life" disembodied and special and apart from normal life. As Dorothy McClean, one of the founders of Findhorn, has said, "there is only ordinary life". Spiritual life is here/now in how we live with each other and on the planet. There is no where else to go. And so, living our experience as it comes, and being true to it, become a central spiritual practice, a major means for connecting to ourselves, others, and the Universe in ways that support and sustain us, and all others, as souls on earth. **Living** experience becomes a spiritual practice which we can pursue right in the world, in our work, in our relationships, in our homes. We don't have to go somewhere special for this, we can practice anywhere, for the flow of experience and the cycles are always there within us and our soul is always seeking to learn from this experience and benefit from it to be more fully incarnated here on earth. We have all we need to practice; we simply need to know how to pay attention and how to work with the cycles in ways that lead to learning and maturation. It is marvelous that we are constructed as human beings so that we have this spiritual resource at hand at all times and in all places. It is, in fact, going on all the time, whether we are aware of it, or not, and we do progress on our paths, even unknowingly. But here, with awareness, we can cooperate with this natural soul process and ripen even more fully as human beings. Staying close to the cycle of immediate experience supports this process and lays out the path before us.

The Fruits of Practice

Many experiences arise from this practice of living experience fully, and these will vary individual to individual in quality and tone. They are the spiritual destiny of each of us, and unique in their particularity. There are four, however, that I have seen appear again and again as this process proceeds, and I take them to be core qualities of the soul which we share in common as human beings. I am sure there are others, but I want to mention these four as examples of soul experiences, arising from embodiment, that I think we share as a species.

The first is gratitude. Assagioli used to say that "gratitude is the deepest human emotion". By this I think he meant that, as the soul increasingly becomes the organizing principle of a life, as we, as souls, become more embodied and our personality and psyche soul-infused, as we learn to live as souls on earth, the natural response to our given life is thanksgiving. This gratitude includes not only the "good" things that happen, but also the challenging and difficult events, for by living them all we have discovered what aspect of the soul they held and what was being given us through this experience. We experience how much we are given by Life, and the natural response to that gift is gratitude. From this we then give back to Life in some way that suits us as souls, for which we are "constitutionally fit", as Abraham Maslow put it. Our giving is not obligatory, but rather spontaneous as a response to the grace and gifts we are receiving. Because, as souls, we experience how much we are given, we give generously in return in whatever ways our calling and abilities incline us.

The second is joy. Assagioli once wrote on a slip of paper to Anne and me, "the yoga of joy: joy is magnetic; joy makes 'war' impossible". I think he was pointing here to the experience of holding any polarity from a point of unity, which is a capacity of the soul, and saying that joy is a sign of the soul who has learned to do this on earth. This means that the soul has been able, either in the moment, or in a sustained way, to embrace the full complexity of its own human experience and integrate, or bear, the poles and conflicts, inner and outer, of its life on earth. We all have those moments of connection to this underlying unity which denies nothing, and, strikingly, they are often accompanied with the sense of "I could die now", which means that at that moment birth and death also are held equally within this context of unity, or being. I think that, as the soul learns to live its life on earth, this joy becomes more sustained, and is magnetic in that it inspires and moves others deeper into their own capacity for this union without loss of differences. The soul's joy includes whatever is arising in experience, and it can embrace suffering and death along with happiness and birth. It is a joy beyond, and including, all conditions--the joy of a soul fully alive on earth.

The third is beauty. Dostoyevsky has said, "beauty will save the earth". What I think he is saying in this is that the soul is capable of experiencing the beauty of what is, whether it is good, or bad, dark, or light, and that, as we mature as souls, we become more and more capable of an immediate apperception of the beauty of the world we live in, be this people, place, plant, animal, whatever. This is not prettiness, or conventional beauty, but an apperception of what I call "kosmos"--the deep order of the universe and life on earth in which we are all participating, whether we know it, or not. It is the experience that everything is alive and interconnected, and that every being has its meaning and place in the whole of creation and is beautiful in this. When we experience this beauty, or kosmos, we are both rooted in our own place/part on earth and we accord others the same dignity and respect for theirs. And in this we experience simultaneously how we are both in common with, and different from, all other beings on earth. This is the apperception of an embodied soul on earth. We all have moments of this, and then we lose it, but my sense is that this is where our maturation as souls is taking us and that, as the species matures as a whole, more and more of us will realize this beauty, give thanks and enjoy it, and praise and protect it with our lives.

The fourth is mystery. One of the last things that Assagioli said to me, a very eager young man who wanted to understand everything immediately, was, "all that you are doing is fine and has its place, but remember, leave a little room for the Mystery". He was not telling me not to think, to explore, to question, to push the boundaries of my understanding and consciousness, but he was reminding me that the context for this exploration is the Unknown, the Mystery. This is not so much a measure of our inadequacy as a species to understand everything as it is a measure of the vastness of creation and the Universe, its openness as a system, and the "incomprehensible complexity", as an astrophysicist friend of mine puts it, that we are immersed in and experience as Life. If we hold the Mystery in this way, then it is a place of rest and renewal, a context that holds our immediate experience and enables it to unfold as I have described above. It is not an enemy to be conquered,

but rather a field of Being within which our becoming, and that of all beings, proceeds.

The New Spirituality

I have written elsewhere about the new spirituality for the twenty-first century (see OCN #7), so I will conclude here briefly only by saying, in review, that the premise I have explored in this Note is that, as we learn to work with the cycle of immediate experience, and see this as spiritual practice, we will both mature psychologically and grow spiritually as human souls, capable of being fully here on earth and experiencing the "rapture" of being fully alive on the planet. "Living experience as spiritual practice" gives us a powerful means with which to incarnate fully and yields fruits which are not only beneficent to us, but to all Life.

My sense is that this idea of a new, earthy spirituality is emerging through many different disciplines, not just psychology, and that it is both rooted in the ancient past of humanity and is something new and unknown to us still. Strikingly, it is coming through people's immediate experience more than through any one school of thought and practice, though many schools are speaking to different aspects of the experience. Is this the soul of the earth at work in all of us, helping us to learn a new way of being and living on the planet? Is there a collective transformation happening on the face of the earth of which this is a small, but central, part? Big questions, and yet, if we stay close to our immediate experience and learn to trust it, perhaps some day we will grow into some such understanding.

I am interested to know your response to these ideas and send you every good wish for your life and work.

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