Straightening the Twig by Dennis Perkins

READINGS (2):

According to Dr. Karl Albrecht, there are only *five basic fears*, out of which almost all of our other so-called fears are manufactured. These are:

1. Extinction—the fear of annihilation, of ceasing to exist. This is a more fundamental way to express it than just "fear of death." The idea of *no longer being* arouses a *primary existential anxiety* in all normal humans. Consider that panicky feeling you get when you look over the edge of a high building.
2. Mutilation—the fear of losing any part of our precious bodily structure; the thought of having our body's boundaries invaded, or of losing the integrity of any organ, body part, or natural function. Anxiety about animals, such as bugs, spiders, snakes, and other creepy things arises from fear of mutilation.
3. Loss of Autonomy—the fear of being immobilized, paralyzed, restricted, enveloped, overwhelmed, entrapped, imprisoned, smothered, or otherwise controlled by circumstances beyond our control. In physical form, it's commonly known as claustrophobia, but it also extends to our social interactions and relationships.
4. Separation—the fear of abandonment, rejection, and loss of connectedness; of *becoming a non-person*—not wanted, respected, or valued by anyone else. The "silent treatment," when imposed by a group, can have a devastating effect on its target.
5. Ego-death—the fear of humiliation, shame, or any other mechanism of profound self-disapproval that threatens the *loss of integrity of the self*; the fear of the shattering or disintegration of one's constructed sense of lovability, capability, and worthiness.

“The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.” — H.P. Lovecraft

MESSAGE: Straightening the Twig

Let’s begin with a brief survey. Hands up everybody here who began life as a baby. Every hand raised (and if the person next to you didn’t raise their hand—be very wary) and yet not one of us has a direct memory of that most common of human experience. Still, having helped to raise babies of my own as well as cared for very young grandchildren, I know enough to make a couple of general statements about all babies.

First and foremost, babies need comfort—the comfort of a full belly, the comfort of quiet and dry shelter, the comfort of adequate sleep, the comfort of a clean diaper, and the comfort of strong arms, a warm breast and soothing words when they are frightened by anything unfamiliar: a strange noise, a strange face—in fact, a strange anything. (As Lovecraft said, “the greatest fear is fear of the unknown.”)

Once comfortable, however, the second great drive in every baby, ultimately the drive behind all scientific progress since the birth of humankind, is curiosity—the drive to know and understand, to see what "stands under" what we perceive, the drive to "put things in our mouths" to see what they feel like, what they taste like, the drive to reach and try to grasp the world around us, in its colors and shapes and textures. (Incidentally, is it any wonder that early man produced a cave painting before he produced a wheel?)

We see these two clearly in another's babyhood—these twin drives for comfort and for knowledge—comfort first and foremost, and then knowledge for understanding—but can easily remain unaware of those same drives within ourselves, continually molding us from the moment of our birth.

The 18th century in Europe (and by extension in the New World of North America) was marked by the pervasive rise of rationality and scientific exploration. Alexander Pope, one the great English poets of the 18th century, saw the inculcation of rationality through education as the saving grace for the future of man. He wrote the following: "Tis Education forms the common mind/Just as the twig is bent so is the tree inclined." The Age of Reason it was hoped would counterbalance and overcome the Dark Ages of superstition and fear. The baby's curious nature could be trained to overcome its equally innate need for comfort in the face of fears.

Let's review for the moment those five great fears articulated by Dr. Karl Albrecht—unnamed but present within us at our birth and growing more discernible over the first years of our lives: the fear of death, the fear of losing a part of our bodily selves through mutilation, the fear of being paralyzed, the fear of being abandoned, and the fear of humiliation—of feeling shamed. Those are certainly evident to us in our individual lives, but think for just a moment of mankind as a single organism, coming into being about 3 million years ago as our earliest ancestor homo sapiens, experiencing these same fears.

These earliest humans traveled in small groups as hunters and gatherers, living on roots, berries, grasses, nuts and the occasional small creatures they could kill. "Staying alive" as the song says. Moving about during the daylight hours and sheltering as best they could during the night.

After a few million years these early humans began to hunt larger mammals, which could and did kill some of the humans who were hunting them. Such hunting required early man to overcome or compensate for the basic fear of annihilation. This is probably the reason for the very first use of talismen and ceremonies related to the need to overpower deadly prey: wearing the hair, teeth and claws of the prey as well as smearing the face and body with the blood and even drinking the blood of prey—in some ways the very first communion.

Over time these defenses to compensate for countering our basic fears turned into elaborate community rituals for capturing the power of prey, or of human enemies or of even nature itself. As communities of early humans evolved from rather small bands of wandering hunting

families into much larger communities of the first farmers and the very beginnings of what we would call civilization in the valleys of the world's great rivers, these rituals changed again and became more elaborate still. Stories of gods dying and being reborn allowed these farmers to feel like they were assuring the continual harvests on which the life of their communities depended, stories of the need for the annual flooding of their fields in the spring as well as the fear of the same river flooding too much and wiping out their huts and themselves.

These great rituals served agrarian communities for thousands of years up until the middle of the first century BC when the second great drive of human babyhood—curiosity and the need for "understanding" made its dramatic appearance in human history. Let's look at the civilizations of the Indus River Valley in Asia as an example. By this time all of the Hindu rituals of the previous centuries had been captured in a series of hymns called the Vedas. Here were the stories of each of the various gods whose worship promised control of the weather, the harvest, the fertility of marriages, the power of community elites and conquest of enemies, as well as the ritual practices that would propitiate these gods.

Then a new type of hymn appeared, created by solitary Indian monastics living in the forests—hymns different from the earlier Vedas, since they had nothing to do with propitiating gods or performing rituals. They were instead elaborate explanations of the nature of reality. In place of describing heavenly communities peopled with gods, goddesses, and demons, these new hymns, called the Upanishads, spoke of a single eternal unified Spirit called Brahman, of which all the other transitory objects of experience were formed, while individual human experience of this spirit, accessed through meditation, was named Atman. Such was the power of this unique insight into reality that the forest monks were convinced that this new IDEA would supplant the ancient rituals and beliefs of the Vedas. "Enlightened" man would no longer feel the need for assurance against ancient fears. In the Upanishads, ordinary life with its joys and fears was just passing fantasy anyway.

So how did this go over, this new idea of Idea over Emotion? It didn't. The rituals continued and became more elaborate still, now incorporating these new concepts of Brahman and Atman—and relegating the power of Brahman into the already ruling class of citizens, who became known as Brahman. Two thousand years later in the civilizations that now inhabit the Indus Valley, these divisions of society into sharply defined classes still exist and the rituals roll on.

To use our baby analogy, the needs for comfort from fear were more powerful than the fruits of satisfying curiosity.

So now let's jump ahead two thousand years to the time of Alexander Pope and the Age of Reason and the belief that education, fostering the growth of curiosity and science, would subvert emotionalism. Incidentally here in religious history is the first appearance of the movements which would become Universalism and Unitarianism, dispensing with religious hierarchies, questioning ancient rituals, supporting scientific enquiry, fostering egalitarianism.

All of this would in short order, (well, 200 or 300 hundred years being short order), lead to the current balance of idea and emotion contained in our seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism. At last the singers of the Upanishads will have been vindicated, the fears of babyhood both of single humans and of humankind will have been relieved. Today, now that education is universal, the ancient religious rituals have been left pretty much behind, we can come out of Plato's cave and walk in the sunlight of scientific reality.

Except… not so fast. War continues. Poverty surrounds the globe. Hundreds of thousands of us find momentary, if ultimately lethal, comfort in various addictions. To this day many of us still turn away in fear from those who are different. Mankind is as intellectually rich as it has ever been, as emotionally aware as it has ever been and yet shows all the earmarks of spiritual starvation.

When in talking with a group of the men at our weekly coffee hour I first tendered this idea of the needs of babyhood being of two categories—comfort and curiosity. A man wiser than I suggested there was a third powerful need: that of connection. I was reminded of it again when I read Dr. Karl Albrecht's list of the most basic fears, particularly the last two: Physical separation: "Go to your room"; solitary confinement in prisons; shunning by members of your religion or your family; being shut out by a group of former friends at school; or being a toddler alone in your crib in the dark. And the last and most profound fear: Unworthiness—feeling shamed and separated within from our own best selves.

What has the power to enable humans to feel the connection that from birth we all seek. What can extend the fellow-feeling first experienced between mother and child, then between child and family, then student and school, citizen and neighborhood, citizen and state and country? Where is the power that we are still obviously lacking and are so hungry for? Dr. Lisa Miller, in her book "The Awakened Brain" recounts her astonishment when she reviewed brain MRIs from a large longitudinal study on depression, all of whose subjects had filled out long questionnaires about their family histories, emotional histories, medical histories, likes, dislikes and even religious beliefs. Doctors had run numerous scans of the MRIs against the variables produced from the questionnaires. But no one had run the MRIs against the two broad religious questions in the surveys: How important is religion or spirituality in your life? And how frequently do you participate in the exercise of that spirituality? The hundreds of MRIs fell into two large categories: The brains of the spiritually active showed numerous light areas of the actively aware brain of a person experiencing little or no depression, while the MRIs of the non-spiritually-engaged were considerably darker. The connection that seemed to offer the greatest protection against fears and emotions of separation resulting in anxiety and depression was the spiritual connection.

For earliest man all of nature that surrounded him was magical, each thing—animal, tree, mountain, cloud—was filled with power, had a soul. As his knowledge developed over the millennia and science revealed more and more about the physical nature of things, modern man became separated from that magic. Intellectual wonder replaced emotional wonder. The

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Brahman, the soul of the universe, was replaced by the smaller gods of the adding machine, the statistical table. Man became smarter and yet more disconnected. One side of our collective brain lit up while another darkened. Smart, angry and alone.

I cannot name the concept that will restore our wonder at the magic of the world into which every human is born but which we have been blind to, but I believe science is nearing the point where it can name the common substance that enlivens all things and that will make mankind feel once again its deep connection to the universe.

When I first saw the UU Principles written out, the one that grabbed my attention and my heart (that is, excited my curiosity and provided a deep comfort for my baby heart) was the 7th—that each human from any time and from all time has always been a part of something greater, encircled by the true reality and held in the embrace of a great spirit. The singers of the Upanishads were right, although then and even now, a little ahead of their time. You and I are part of the great Brahman, and no one is excluded. The Greek letter Theta on the front of your Order of service captures this. Intellect and emotion balanced by and surrounded by love.

May it be so.