



MATTERS OF THE SOUL

Chapter Six: Reality, The Bottom Line

To speak of involving the spiritual in our lives is a paradoxical way of describing a situation that already exists. Spirituality refers to a reality in all of its layers of complexity from the physical that we can see and touch to the abstract that our minds can't possibly comprehend. Our unconscious provides us access to these layers of reality in which we can and do participate. The unconscious is our gateway or bridge from the levels which are described in psychological terms detailing impairment to the spiritual realm which describes an unbroken Whole. The unconscious is our vehicle for moving from one level to another.

The unconscious exists for each of us in several levels or layers. These layers graduate from the level of the personal repressed unconscious to the level of participation without differentiation in the Whole. **It is the degree of our openness to contacting these varying levels of the unconscious that determines how open we are to knowing reality.**

How much of our inner worlds we are willing to know determines how available we are to participate in the whole (internal and external) without self-imposed blocks. And this is how we establish our current level of consciousness.

Reality: Internal and External

Reality is. What we are willing to know of reality determines what we experience.

We can't choose to participate in external reality with any meaningful depth while avoiding our own inner reality. Likewise, the extent to which we are willing to know our inner worlds determines how available we are to know the outer. One reflects the other. Delving further within inevitably implies deepening our outward availability.

Therefore, our level of consciousness or our degree of unclouded participation in the whole is defined by the unconscious.

What do we mean by this?

At the most basic level we all have a need to think of ourselves as acceptable, decent, worthy individuals. We want others to like us and we want to like ourselves. We want to know that we are respectable. But after years of living with ourselves, we all come to realize that we can be mean-spirited at times or selfish and insensitive or just plain boorish. We are not the loving or gracious or powerful or self-confident images we display. Not all of the time. And not in the depths of who we are.

If we want to know ourselves more than superficially, in more depth than we show most people whom we encounter casually, then we will discover the anger, the jealousy, the self-doubt, and the immaturity we hate to acknowledge, that we wish weren't there, and that we definitely don't want to advertise. We have to admit to ourselves that we are not who we wish we were and that, in fact, several "unacceptable" qualities thrive within us.

Initially, our personal unconscious developed in our lives to hide from us what we didn't want to see about ourselves (without our even knowing it). We denied or repressed--pushed out of conscious awareness--those events and wishes and dynamics that we just couldn't integrate into our image of ourselves. We somehow managed not to see our responsibility for hurting another. We just didn't remember those instances of childhood abuse which were overwhelmingly painful many years ago. We forgot how angry we were with an apparently critical and unaccepting but controlling caretaker.

Perhaps our safe image included burying our anger so that our parents would approve of us. Maybe it was hiding vulnerability from neighborhood bullies so that we wouldn't be shamed. Or perhaps we just couldn't live with our own hurt from betrayal and mistreatment by a trusted ally.

To establish whatever it was that seemed to promise a way to make life easier, we (unconsciously) rearranged our inner worlds. We eliminated some pain-filled aspects of who we were and emphasized what looked like acceptable, adaptive ways of being and interacting. We wanted to be something other than we were. Just experiencing life naturally, with feelings and conflicts and hurts and fears and losses, was unpredictable and unmanageable. Out of our childhood powerlessness we protected ourselves (unconsciously) with denial or repression. In that way our child minds hoped to restore balance.

We were small and helpless then and needed acceptance and protection. Our unconscious aided our adaptation to a fixed situation beyond our control or influence: all we could change was ourselves and our unconscious helped us to do that. Its job was to protect us. So, with feelings that were too painful or impulses that we couldn't control, the unconscious quickly and surreptitiously assisted us by erasing the feelings, eliminating the conflict. What had existed that seemed unresolvably disruptive was now, through the magic of denial or repression, no longer a conflict. There just wasn't a problem anymore. The excruciating pain was no longer felt. The feelings and impulses that had led to estrangement from our family now disappeared.

We became what was expected of us and what we wished we could be. Then we felt safe. We had eliminated points of difficulty with outer authorities and had restored a sort of inner balance for ourselves. The denial or the repression seemed to have solved the problem and to deliver us to a state that looked acceptable.

Through denial or repression, our unconscious affected our experience of reality. Our availability to know the reality which existed within us was diminished by our need to think of ourselves as being more like the image that promised us some control in making our childhood interactions and environment comfortable.

It worked for a while. Probably we did find some way to adapt to our world so that we could live with relative calm. The price for this assumed peace was the inner

alienation of some parts of ourselves, but that was a small price for a young child to pay to insure safety.

This process of denying or repressing undesirable traits or feelings or impulses continued for us without our awareness during growing up times when we learned what it was to have friends and to succeed at work. We chose not to look at some areas of ourselves while strengthening our avoidance of previously repressed facets of our inner worlds. Thus, the inner alienation and compartmentalization continued.

Once in a while there would be disruptions. The anger we tried to ignore would explode if we had one drink too many. Our sense of loneliness would overwhelm us when we were tired and stressed. But the years until mid-life were characterized by strong defenses against intrusions from the repressed contents of the unconscious.

What is not seen inside will forcefully confront us from the outside. So, during these early years of distorting reality by unconscious denial or repression, we also experienced reality rudely intruding into our safely constructed worlds through projection. If anger had been repressed and, thus, not owned, we encountered others who carried that projection. We ran into people who expressed anger loudly and often directed it at us. If we didn't want to act selfishly, we contacted self-centered, insensitive individuals whom we were unable to influence by our generosity. And then we greatly resented them.

Repression always implies projection. The intensity of our emotional responses today reveals the existence of current projections (and, implicitly, repressions). Every quality and characteristic exists in the world. Only some of them elicit our strong feelings. Those are the ones that tell us what we need to acknowledge in ourselves. What we react to outside of ourselves tells us what we are avoiding seeing inside of us.

This alteration of conscious awareness by the unconscious through denial or repression describes our initial unwillingness to know what is. Our attempt to distort and, thus, make more palatable a reality we can't control alienates us from our wholeness.

By repression we individually create our own Shadows--the cache of unwanted and unaccepted aspects of ourselves which already exists but which we choose to hide from conscious awareness. We attempt to adjust reality to our wants and needs in the service of being acceptable, in whatever ways we define acceptable. We can't change outer reality but we can affect our awareness of inner reality through repression.

After repression follows projection and the reflection back to us of our repressed aspects through others. By projecting, we influence our experience of external reality. Thus, we have distorted our view of and experience of outer reality by alienating parts of our inner world. A distorted and inaccurate level of consciousness has been created. And each of us has done all this through the machinations of our own unconscious. We have powerfully influenced our experience of life without even knowing we have done so! We think we are the victims of others and don't see that they act out projections of our repressions for us. We are truly victims, but only of our own unconscious, not of others. And so, at this level of consciousness, our personal distortions manifest in our individual psychological dysfunction.

Spirituality involves being open to experiencing oneness. We have been talking about the psychodynamic descriptions of impairment in this experience through denial, repression, and projection. These are relevant to our consideration of spirituality because psychological explanations describe a spirituality/oneness which is fractured by personal maladaptation.

The psychological realm is one segment in the continuum of the levels of consciousness that constitute spiritual reality. By addressing the distortions in an individual's consciousness and the healing of them, the psychological points toward the path to further levels of consciousness--levels which include fewer and less severe divisions in an individual's experience of the oneness that is reality.

EXERCISE

Let your eyes close. . . . Focus on your breath. . . . As your breath descends from your head to your toes, you realize that there is an elevator inside you which also moves up and down. . . . This is a glass elevator, your vehicle for moving through the different levels of who you are. . . .

The landings you can view from this elevator are your own internal levels. Move into your elevator. . . . It stands at your surface level. . . . What you see here is what others perceive about you--your appearance, your manner, your words and actions. . . . Just notice what you see at the surface level. . . .

What does it feel like here? . . . What are the first three words that come to mind to describe this surface level you are now viewing? . . . Listen and receive. . . .

Your elevator now descends slowly to the basement, a deeper level inside you. . . . This is the level that is private--thoughts, feelings, and decisions of which you are aware but do not share with others. . . . What do you notice at this level? . . . This is the hidden part of you not many people know. Feel what it's like to be here. . . .

Your elevator now descends to a sub-basement, an even deeper level in you. . . . This is the part that is hidden even from your mind. . . . At this level are your painful feelings, the impulses that can't be integrated, the parts that you are slow to own. . . . This level is the opposite of the surface level. Every human characteristic that doesn't appear at your surface or private levels lives here. . . . Experience this. . . .

Get off of your elevator and walk around this landing and notice what you see. . . . What do you find here? . . . This is the place where your greed and ugliness, your envy and deceit lurk, hidden from you. . . . What else do you find living here? . . . You may be surprised or even shocked at what you find but don't stop walking. . . . What do you see? . . . How does it feel being here? . . . When you're here, you're owning all of yourself. . . . There isn't anything that you can say is too offensive to belong to you. . . . Keep walking around and feel what it's like to be here. . . .

You get back in the elevator and notice that there are lower levels. . . . Breathe. .

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REFLECTIONS

Does it seem contradictory to focus on your own Shadow material as a way of connecting to a greater spiritual reality? It's not, really. It's the first step in the process of reconnecting. The Shadow is the part inside of ourselves that we are putting energy into disowning. We were connected with all parts of ourselves at one time. Then we pushed some parts away, out of awareness. Now we want to welcome them back. We do this cautiously. Probably we are distrusting of these parts, certainly we are afraid. We can't quite figure out how to make them part of our lives. But we must. Somehow we need to recapture every part that belongs to us, distasteful as that may be at times. And then we need to acknowledge, feel, and stay open to it.

Ask yourself the following questions and write your responses in your journal:

Do you trust your feelings? Are there feelings you fear? Do you think that there are parts of yourself that you need to avoid?

How about the thinking process that your mind uses? Can you tell when it is influenced by your fear or your anger?

In what ways are you self-hating? What do you do compulsively--work, eat, drink, play, smoke? How is your compulsion serving to hide your ongoing inner flow of experience from your awareness?

With which subpersonalities do you have trouble living? Which subpersonalities are immature, not child-like but childish? How does your Mature Adult relate to them? How have you curtailed your spontaneity in ways that restrict your maturity?

What would a mature relationship with your own spiritual reality require that you release?

We are not alone in this endeavor. Life is helping us. Our experience in the outer world gives us the inner experiences we need to heal our splits. Being reflective may help in this process. If we can understand the significance of our outer world experience in terms of mirroring the unconscious, then we can be a partner with life. We can recognize that what happens to us aids in our healing.

But even if we don't understand, just experiencing what life brings without resentment or blame moves us toward wholeness. Having experiences in the outer world, then breathing and watching our inner world, greatly facilitates integration. Spend time each day this week watching what is in your inner world. Then write about it. Do you notice correlations inside with your outer world experience?