

6/1/21 class notes

In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 13C – Reaction and Review #3 – Part 3

Our internet server is being changed tomorrow, so this might be that last missive from the Portland Gurukula for a while. Don't panic—incompetent experts are on the job! It's a monopoly move: squeezing out small independent businesses.

We began with high hopes of finishing off the chapter, yet the perennial conundrum of the role of words in realization kept us humming on the first topic for the entire time. Next week we'll address fantasy, and then take a week off from class after that.

The epitome of the questions in the book is: Don't we think with words? And, Is it actually possible to have experiences without formulating words in the mind to follow the course or flow of thoughts?

Deb opened the conversation, pointing out that Nitya is drawing our attention to the verbal aspect to include not just the specificity or expressiveness of words but the moment before, the pre-verbal zone that is their source: the unconscious but very much alive space where words come from. There is a well within, containing all our words and experiences. Before we speak or write we are choosing our words—really they are being chosen for us—in what she calls “the moment before.” You can find a poem by her on this in Part II.

I noted that by now, though not when Stream of Consciousness was being written, neuroscientists are well aware that we are seeing a processed and edited version of what's coming in to our senses, and there's a slight delay that we don't notice, because we are glued on to our brain's magic show. What we're perceiving is a manufactured “movie spectacular” that implausibly happens to work in interaction with the rest of the universe, but is all our own doing, including our verbalization of it. It is in no way “reality as such.”

Anita wanted to know what you would call this place, the place before? Deb flippantly quoted Bob Dylan, “I don’t call it anything, said Frankie Lee with a smile,” but then found her way to a term we all know. On the way, she mused it’s not the unconscious but the preconscious, the present... for each of us it’s a different well or cloud. Then she arrived: it’s called our dharma.

I’m not too fond of the word dharma, since, like God, it has all sorts of corrupt interpretations, but ideally that’s the correct term. In English I prefer to use authenticity or our true nature. Words to that effect.

Deb remembered asking Nitya a few times about what to do when there was an impasse in her life, in other words about how to recover her dharma. At first he ignored her, but eventually he advised her to just listen: “If you listen closely, you will hear something arise that will put you in the right direction.” She took it to mean don’t be stupid about it, but be open to vaster possibilities, and if you are, an inner intelligence will speak to you. This became the theme of the evening. It could well be the theme of a lifetime.

Deb feels Nitya is pointing us to a vital emotional component in addition to our linear, logical patterns. We are a much more complex web than we realize, and all of it is what we bring to bear in uttering words.

Anita wondered if our dharma was related at all to the collective unconscious, and it isn’t particularly. Dharma, at least in the practical sense, is focused on the individual. Of course there’s a theoretical place where we could imagine all our inner dharmas being connected, but as of now science is limited to how the individual brain works. Scientists are newly enchanted with the tremendous power of each brain, yet so far there is no measurable evidence of any oversoul that we all participate in.

Last week I introduced Lisa Feldman Barrett’s *7 1/2 Lessons About the Brain*, which is about as up-to-date as we can get right now in a book of popular neuroscience. Her last chapter is on how our brains do influence each other, within collective activity. That has been observed, but no all-connecting mechanism has been

discovered, so nobody can say with any assurance why it's happening. It might just be the brain responding to its environment in hyper-alert fashion. It has been observed that a lot of things synchronize when you're with other people. Much of what we accomplish is accomplished collectively. We are much more than isolated individuals, when we are connected.

Lesson 7's first sentence is "Most of your life takes place in a made-up world." Only a scientist's caution prevents her from saying "all" instead of "most," I'm guessing. How is this different from maya? It isn't. She continues: "You actively and willingly participate in this made-up world every day. It is real to you." Amen. It's hardly a bad thing, but it is a limitation we should be cognizant of.

The class conversed about several situations where the unconscious "spoke" to our conscious mind, and we were able to act appropriately. This is normally called intuition, by the way—teaching from within. I think intuition goes on all the time, but we generally take it for granted or ignore it, unless we're in an emergency. Anita told us about falling—maybe she was pushed down—some stairs, and as she tumbled she distinctly heard the word *relax*. She did, and because she stayed loose she was able to walk away, substantially uninjured. Relaxation is the best thing, and the hardest, to do in an accident. Had Anita been tense, she might easily have broken her neck.

Susan shared a great intuition story:

About 20 years ago I was just coming home from visiting my grandmother. We had guests staying with us and when I walked in everyone was crying and very upset because Sandra (the mom) was choking on a bagel and she couldn't breathe. Time slowed down and though I had never done anything like it before, I grabbed her from behind and pulled up in the Heimlich maneuver. The piece of bagel flew out, and she was okay. I somehow knew just what to do and was very

determined that Sandra should be okay, and it seemed as if every move I made was flowing toward that effort.

I feel that being aware that we have these kinds of capabilities makes us more transparent to them. We are trained to suppress and ignore our impulses, and that blocks the flow of the good ones along with the bad. Fortunately, emergency situations often have the power to overcome our resistance. Philosophers could also train themselves to resist less.... One of Nitya's sentences speaks to this: "We are more familiar with the linear transactions comprising our conscious experience than their relatively instantaneous, nonverbal presentation." So lighten up on the linearity, friends!

Getting back to our original topic, Barrett's fourth lesson is titled: Your Brain Predicts (Almost) Everything You Do. The meaning is not that the brain somehow guesses correctly what we are about to do, but that it "pre-dictates" almost everything we do. At least some of its dictations are really worthwhile, in a healthy person.

This is confirmed by fMRI, and it means we're living in the past, just a smidgen. Our role in the waking world is as the validator of what is presented to us. We see the well-prepared choices that come up, and implement them or not, depending on our predilections. ("Something just came up!" we say.) That means everything you perceive with your senses is what your own brain has cooked up from the coded electrical impulses of the senses, crafted by previous memories. A yogi has to accept that it's not quite unedited reality. As Nitya puts it, in his Patanjali commentary,

The yogi makes every effort not to be a howler telling untruth or a simpleton believing in something because somebody said it or it is written somewhere. (243)

... or because it popped into their head. yet we also have to accept that this is the way we work. If you doubt your perceptions you have to be prepared not to inhibit the perfection of how you operate on the basis of those “falsehoods.” They are our best estimation. It’s a true yoga problem, to be dealt with dialectically. Like maya.

Most brain scientists are still grappling with the implications of this new knowledge, despite the clear evidence of brain imaging. Nitya didn’t have the MRI information, but he would have found it in complete accord with his understanding of mental processes, grounded in the ancient wisdom. All his life he was an avid reader of the latest theories and findings in science, especially psychology and physics. He died the very year the scientific view of the brain was reconnected with his theories, thanks to brain imaging, and he would have eagerly embraced it. It’s fair to say that this he wrote sums up the gist:

The word content of a thought is the last and finalized element of conscious thinking. Conscious experience itself is only a peak of the total content of the mind, of which structured consciousness clothed with language is only the snowy crest of the peak.

Deb talked about how people who write or make music or paint are inevitably surprised by what they come up with, which is so much more than the rational outline they start with. This is part of the process Nitya is pointing us to, to be open, to be aware, of what’s arising within us.

Steven is fascinated by way poetry uses language, with its magical power to elicit feeling and emotion, or even spiritual insight. Deb has been reading poet Seamus Heaney’s essay collection, *Finders Keepers*, where he describes poetry as the means for finding a way to say what is unsayable. The essence of all good poetry is to arrive at transcendence of what poet and reader expect. The American poet Donald Hall even has a book

titled *The Unsayable Said*. Deb speaks as a poet herself, and she talked about how you are constantly moving *behind* things, entering into a cauldron of possibilities, trying to communicate what can't be said in everyday conversation. She admires Philip Levine, whose poetry deals with prosaic subjects like factory workers in the 1940s and 50s, a direct, immanent world, yet he conveys transcendence through it.

Steven concurred that poetry can give shape to deeper states of consciousness, unlocking the archetypal collective unconscious. Children, who have not become so routinized as adults, can formulate sentences that sound like poetry. Adults writing poetry is like going back into the state of childlike wonder.

Steven finds this part of the review chapter is the most intriguing, with its sustained analysis of the flow of consciousness, particularly this:

It's not clear how a thought or emotion first enters consciousness, but at a certain point it becomes vivid. It builds to a climax of clarity, and afterwards you don't notice at all how it fades out, because the clarity of another thought is already occupying the central focus of your awareness. In this way, crowding thoughts, fleeting emotions, and changing moods all succeed each other in a tumultuous manner. [Because of this] the bulk of intense experience falls outside the scope of being able to be verbalized.

A blend of millions of resonances is in every passing moment. Attempting to fully describe it serves no purpose. Furthermore, the telescoping of emotions leaves them so close together and at the same time unattended by the categorizing or classifying faculty, that the blend of emotions can never be clearly analyzed in terms of pure moods.

Steven spoke of how Nitya gives us this picture of the tumultuous ongoing tumble of thoughts, emotions, and how they quickly fade, making it pointless to analyze them. He wondered why certain

things actually do grab our attention and become more conscious and more motivational. What is the process that pulls our focus from thoughts and sensations to become formative drives? He wondered if desire is a key: our biological desires, hunger, sexual appetite, desire for name and fame, power. Just what *are* the drivers in our lives?

Nitya has written elsewhere about the importance finding our master drive, and, generally speaking, desires are seen as impediments to attunement with it. They are distractions for the most part. I'd distinguish between desires that carry us away from authenticity, and those more subtle ones that contribute to our enthusiasm. Nitya taught that our passionate interests are evidence of attunement with our dharma, and it seems to me desire and interest are close cousins, at the very least.

Deb responded to Steven that Nitya is referring to all those desires and our vasantas, how when something comes up and connects us with our dharma, there is some activation of our ability to express them. His advice was to watch what you are drawn to, your interests, and you will see where your dharma is trying to rise up and express itself. Deb told us that in her life, she has observed strands that seemed chaotic or meaningless, but when she looks back she sees how they have been coming along with her all this time, becoming aspects of who she has become.

That's a key element here: most of us are old enough to look back over our life and detect some coherent shaping, the ways we were guided, perhaps, without knowing it, to become who we are now. Probably we won't become The Greatest Human of All Time, but we can appreciate our humble part in the game, at least.

Steven continued that we have a strong desire for transcendence, also. Human beings have always imbibed intoxicants because we have an inherent desire to escape the mundane. He thought that desire was also the impulse behind religion, how people just cannot accept the fact that this is all there is. He wanted to add this to the list of beneficial desires that forge a purpose of consciousness.

I surmised that if your dharma, your innate drive, has the task of directing your timid and nearly blind “waking mind” toward enriching expressions, then desire is surely the best tool at its disposal. Dharma has a tough job breaking through our dense and superficially-convinced attitudes, and polite requests rarely are enough. Dharma’s incentives ratchet up until we get the picture. Or explode in frustration.

We should keep in mind that when our dharma is thwarted, it can drive us mad. We are literally furious (quietly or noisily) that we are not allowed (by ourselves or others) to express what feels right to us. We have so many sources telling us what our dharma should or shouldn’t be, convincing us to thwart ourselves, and making it harder and harder to have authentic experiences, which is after all the central issue of life.

I always come back to Nitya’s image of a growing plant as exemplifying living one’s dharma. We animals pass through all the stages of life just like a plant does, from tender sprouts to full flowering glory to withered husks. The plant has a blueprint for perfection, beauty, functionality, the whole bit, but all along insects suck its sap, winds and frolicking children break its branches, unfertile soil fails to nourish it, and it ends up a twisted vestige of its potential. A little tending makes a big difference. Let me reprise Nitya’s letter of July 1971: “My lot is of a clumsy old gardener who cuts and prunes the bushes and hunts out the vermin and the fungus that come to destroy the delicate buds of his blossoming bushes.”

We should take responsibility for at least some measure of this healthy development. Karen and Anita told us about being in a movement in the 1980s, called Life Spring. Their main takeaway was not treating themselves as victims anymore, but knowing their life was under their own guidance, and they saw how it made a positive impact on many participants, including themselves.

Karen said it made you look at yourself and be accountable, accepting that you were responsible for everything that happens in your life, and it was fascinating for her to watch people change

before her eyes, once they stopped blaming others. For Anita, after you went through this you got sparkly, and everyone looked at you differently. Strangers would come up to her and say nice things. There was a “collective effervescence” in the movement, a term Steven learned in his sociology training. The class felt bubbly about the new term, and adopted it. Steven called collective effervescence another kind of intoxicant to transform the mind, a collectivity that is emerging, that you can feel. According to the sociologist Emile Durkheim, it’s the way people get a sense of God through ritual. For more:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_effervescence .

Bill commented that everybody wants to know God, and Deb reframed it as simply as us wanting to recognize who we are.

Steven wondered how we might do that for ourselves without creating a cult. Drumming would be great, or chanting, some kind of transformative rhythm, repetition, sense of gravity. Nancy added that Native Americans do that in drumming circles: it takes over really quickly, bringing everyone into a different zone. Anyway, Durkheim was speaking more or less scientifically about a social phenomenon that produces religions. The Gurukula is not interested in producing a religion, but is interested in abetting self-realization. These are not automatically mutually exclusive, but pretty close to it.

Although I’m clearly not into anything like that, I agree collective endeavor is fun, so get into whatever lights you up, go for it. We live in a society of highly repressed people, and everyone needs an outlet, preferably a kindly-motivated one. It feels fabulous to allow yourself a measure of true freedom, which includes freedom from self-imposed constraints. Humans often need peer pressure to help them along, though it’s perilous. What suits me is quiet contemplation, reflection, inner exultation, and one-on-one communication; I prefer quietude, because *listening* is my main practice. It would be oxymoronic for this to become a mass movement.

I listen because I’ve found that life is always whispering

advice and encouragement to me, and I want to stay in touch with it. The “whispering” is not the same as my inner monologue, but its message often does appear in words. As an example, once or twice I’ve overheard a random phrase in a crowd, and that phrase somehow clicked with me—it was just what I needed to hear. I believe that happens to us so much we take it for granted. We don’t notice the miracle or magic that brings it, so it mostly goes right by us. Anita’s and Susan’s earlier examples stood out for them, so they did recall them.

We finished up with more direct focus on immanence and transcendence. Only one letter off, *imminence* means about to happen, often in a threatening sense. *Immanence*, the word we’re using, means indwelling or inherent. In philosophy, it refers to mental acts, things taking place solely within the mind. *Transcendence* is the opposite: rising above or beyond the limits, not bound at all by the material realm.

Steven provided a balancing notion that the transcendent is something inherently within, and you transcend the ego to realize the cosmic self, which is immanent.

Yes, this demonstrates the immanence of transcendence, and the transcendence of immanence, which is what we lose when desires and conflicting necessities drive us away from our dharma.

Susan neatly summed up the impact: transcendence makes you more present.

I offered one last example. In the week before the Tuesday class, very often something odd will happen to me, and I won’t connect it with the coming class, whether I have only a vague notion about the topic or it’s very familiar. Then during the class discussion, I’ll realize that it was in fact a vivid example of just what we are talking about. Something in me, out of my awareness, presented me with an illustration of what is often a subtle implication of what we’re about to dig into. It’s as much a surprise to me as anyone else. Probably more.

Something like that happened to Charles the night before this class. He had a long dream where he was pursuing a printed word,

one he didn't know the meaning of. In the dream it looked like an elf word, from Middle Earth. In his dream episodes he was trying to find out how to say it and what it meant. When he awoke he looked it up, and found it: *fainéant* — a lazy, idle person, from the French. He told me later, "The dream was odd. This wasn't something I made up, I mean, this wasn't coming from me. It was ego alien. You couldn't say it was self-deprecating." Well, you could, but it is more impressive seeming to come from without. Charles was probably thinking it was guru-deprecation. He has felt like that guidance he's gotten from life and its gurus, and is beginning to have a somewhat better take on it. Charles, I'm going to quote you briefly, from the last Gita lesson, though the long version would be more interesting. You can see how this too fits with the theme of this other class:

How I came to have such a happy outcome after all the waywardness and bad choices is a puzzle, which I think about in a Jungian way as a blessing of divine grace, the outcome of collective spiritual forces operating less visibly behind and underneath the more alarmingly obvious collective psychic and material forces going on out there on the street.

I suggested to Charles that the dream was his unconscious class preparation. Where we were mainly going from the dharma-core outward to the idea, the word, and ultimately the writing of the word, in the dream he went the other direction, the written word inward. Regardless, he was exploring the spectrum of *sphota*, the explosive power of words. Another thing science is just catching up on lately.

As a last note on dharma, here's one more quote from Lisa Barrett, from the half-lesson of the 7 ½ lessons on the brain:

The idea that our brains evolved for thinking has been the source of many profound misconceptions about human nature. Once you give up that cherished belief, you will have taken the

first step toward understanding how your brain actually works and what its most important job is—and, ultimately, what kind of creature you really are. (2-4)

During the closing meditation I sat still within an ocean of awareness, peaceful and blissful, into which words occasionally intruded. A few of those caught my attention briefly; the rest were instantly dismissed. The proportions were about right, infinity on the one hand, trifles of finitude on the other; the first always present, the other continually in motion, producing world upon world of interest before fading away into nothingness.

Part II

Deb's third chapbook is titled *The Moment Before*, and here's the title poem in it:

Shards of Light

If this were the beginning
of a new poem
she would call what she felt inside
the silence of snow.
Memories of straight, shadowed trees,
flakes falling hour after hour
in the northern night.
She walks to the edge of the lake,
under the snow wordless cracks in the ice,
under the ice, cold currents,
the world a well,
the moment before.
Silence seeps from the weighted branches
into her ears and eyes, her shoulders.
Silence fills her mouth.

She turns
to the over-hanging night,
the open sky
filled with shards of light,
those long ago stars,
their stories unraveling to her,
their faint music
becoming stronger,
words and dreams all drifting,
streaming down
in dark currents, sparks
and the voiceless song.

* * *

Deb shared lovely additional excerpts from Seamus Heaney's
Finders Keepers (collected essays), pages 355-6:

What Yeats' poem *The Man and the Echo* implies is something that I have repeatedly tried to establish through several different readings and remarks in the course of these lectures (given at Harvard): namely, that the goal of life on earth, and of poetry as a vital factor in the achievement of that goal, is what Yeats called in the poem *Under Ben Bulbin* the "profane perfection of mankind".

In order to achieve that goal, therefore, and in order that human beings bring about the most radiant conditions for themselves to inhabit, it is essential that the vision of reality which poetry offers be transformative, more than just a printout of the given circumstances of its time and place. The poet who would be most the poet has to attempt an act of writing that outstrips the conditions even as it observes them. The truly creative writer, by interposing his or her perception and expression, will transfigure the conditions and effect thereby what I have been calling "the redress of poetry". The world is different after it has been read by a

Shakespeare or an Emily Dickinson or a Samuel Beckett because it has been augmented by their reading of it.

We go to poetry, we go to literature in general, to be forwarded within ourselves. The best it can do is to give us an experience that is like foreknowledge of certain things which we already seem to be remembering. What is at work in this most original and illuminating poetry is the mind's capacity to conceive a new plane of regard for itself, a new scope for its own activity. Which is why I turn in conclusion to *The Man and the Echo*, a poem where human consciousness is up against the cliff-face of mystery, confronted with the limitations of human existence itself. Here the consciousness of the poet is in full possession of both its creative impulse and its limiting knowledge. The knowledge is limiting because it concedes that pain necessarily accompanies the cycles of life and that failure and hurt—hurt to oneself and to others—persist disablingly behind even the most successful career. Yet in the poem the spirit's impulse still remains creative and obeys the human compulsion to that “great work” of spiritual intellect.

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From Nitya's Brihadaranyaka Upanishad commentary, Volume III, on immanence and transcendence:

In spite of the similarity between the causal consciousness of the third state (*sushupti*) and the fourth, *turiya* is not a state but the only truth and foundation on which the other three states are manifesting. We pass on from causal consciousness to transcendence, which is not consciousness or awareness but the ultimate basis of all. As one has to make a breakthrough of the empirically conditioned state, normally a person does not recognize transcendence. Only in the phenomenology explained by Husserl, Heidegger and Jaspers is this problem properly met by

seeing the unity of transcendence in immanence, and immanence in transcendence. (196)

There is a common element in transcendence and immanence. The homogeneity of that which gives the ability to make existence subsistential, and remove the plurality of subsistential existence is ananda. Both the sun that illuminates and the Self that witnesses the illumined are to be reduced to ananda to understand the fourth *pada* (turiya). (197)

When we think of our outgoing consciousness and the sublime consciousness that is being absorbed into the Self, each one has different kinds of freedom. One is the freedom to go by one's own will into the electromagnetic field of being, subjected to the continuous push and pull of psychosomatic urges. By our own free will, we barter our freedom forever. The other is losing our identity in the freedom of pure Being. In spite of the polemics between the outer and the inner, both are necessary and complementary to arrive at the final step of transcendence of the outwardly conditioned world and the inwardly conditioned states of mind. (201)

Part III

Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination. – Ludwig Wittgenstein