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In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 13D – Reaction and Review #3 – Part 4

The last two questions in this most provocative section get right to the crux of the problem of What's It All About? When we had to stop on account of darkness, the discussion was just taking off into fresh territory. Will there be a 13D Part B? Stay tuned.

The two questions are what does it mean that our relationships with others are “a gift of your own fantasizing unconscious,” and “When is fantasy pathological, and when is it healthy?”

I'm pretty sure the second question was mine, as it was a burning issue to me. While I loved fantasy, Nitya had always been coming down hard on fantasizing as unspiritual, and in chapter 9 it was framed as rather benign and essential. In the 1970s, Nitya was dealing with what amounted to a bunch of lunatics, in terms of our grasp of reality. The wilder the speculation, the more attractive it was. Rampant drug use and the tenor of the times inspired extreme excitement in untethered fantasies and wild hopes. Nitya was trying to help us to winnow our thoughts down to essentials that made sense. At times he must have felt like a Herakles battling the hydra.

I was obsessed with the question, because I loved the craziness and believed in much of it, but I also respected Nitya as a solid rock of sanity in the midst of a hurricane. Humans can't live without fantasizing: as soon as you try to get rid of it, it's like washing lather out of soap. Yet it was an important practice to bring it into focus, because exaggerated fantasies can be very harmful. The internet is Exhibit A in how easy it is to amplify hatred, violence and social disintegration in an echo chamber of unmitigated monsters from the id. We were fantasizing in those halcyon days about peace, love and universal harmony, but to some extent our thinking was as baseless as interstellar conspiracy theories.

Because the question was brought up, we have Nitya's clear-eyed assessment: look at effects of your beliefs to be sure of their value. Not unlike "By their fruits ye shall know them." (Matt. 7.20). As Nitya puts it:

If your fantasy beautifies life, if it inspires you to love, and if it enables you to sympathize, it is valuable. If it causes a nightmare to yourself and others, you may need the guidance of a wise guru to readjust the folds of your brain.

Simple. Yet elusive enough to "stagger sextillions of infidels."  
And wise gurus are rare.

Deb opened the conversation with an idea about wonder from the previous chapter, *The Wonder of the Guru*:

Although it looks very irrational to show reverence or be in a state of adoration, several of the deep-seated instincts which make human life integral, whole, and meaningful cannot be dragged into the blatant light of reason. However profound reason may be, it is pale and shallow when compared to the depth of certain intimate experiences which bring awe and reverence to the soul. Only when man finds under his feet the plank of such experiences does he feel that he has roots.

She contrasted this reverence with the acceptance of this section:

What makes a life beautiful is an attitude of acceptance. There is no experience of beauty without the element of wonder in it. A hidden cause giving rise to a profound effect is the main theme of wonder. When the cause is not known, the mind wants to explain the situation to itself and becomes prolific in its imagination. The result is a fantasy.

Deb asked us how, in midst of everyday life, do we experience these two words, reverence and acceptance? When prompted, she

offered that reverence is a sense of respect and wonder at what we encounter in the world, while acceptance is being open to what comes, whether we approve of it or not, seeing it as a gift from life. In a sense, the first is an outgoing impulse and the second is incoming.

She further felt that fantasy is basically the same as imagination. Either way, despite not knowing the beginning of a train of thought, we are always creating the world around us. She further prompted us: what is it that we want to imagine or why do we want to fantasize certain things?

Steven's initial thought was related to what Nitya says at the end:

The greatest fantasy collectively lived from the very dawn of human history and one which is likely to last forever is the idea of God. For people like Freud and Marx, fantasizing the God-image was pathological. For millions of people it is their only consolation in life.

The premise is if imagination produces things of value then it is worthwhile. Steven agreed that even though the *idea* of God is imaginary, it can be valuable in providing consolation. Imagination plays a big role in his spiritual practice, where he's consciously willing himself into a state of reverence, wonder, awe, piety, and so on. He said, "When I make the effort to imagine that kind of a (divine) being, I become it. It brings calm and peacefulness that I can feel resonating throughout my day." He figures imagination can be part of spiritual practice, and it's perhaps even essential.

Paul's takeaway from a recent documentary on the human body was also that everyone fantasizes to understand their world. Whether your view is religious or not, that's how you interpret everything you experience. It's now well understood that sense inputs stop at the body's surface, and then the brain interprets them according to its lights. He appreciates how Nitya is trying to show

us how to construct the room of our perception to be more inclusive or generic—in other words, more open.

I noted that *Stream of Consciousness* was written in a time—only 45 years ago—when it was still universally accepted that what you perceived was the real world. Since then the realization has dawned that we are relating to a construct of our own mind, which means, among many other things, we have the ability to change how we wield it. You can see from the writing that even Nitya was still thinking somewhat in that way: we just have to get back to reality. Now the idea is to rewire our interpretations to make them more positive and beneficial, because reality has infinitely receded. Our task is to find some kind of balance point where we can stay afloat in the midst of the chaos, the awareness of which admittedly comes as a huge shock. Even most philosophers and scientists haven't fully adjusted, and let's face it: the image we project works. It's functional, and extremely compelling. So until we bump up against dire consequences, we're likely to just muddle ahead as if we're actually in tune with our surroundings.

The human race is just beginning to cope with this new knowledge, which allows people to dedicate themselves to nefarious ends as well as harmonious ones. It's crucial for us to adjust to this, since the fear of God is no longer a major factor in society.

Nitya doesn't want us to feel inadequate just because we aren't in touch with reality as such. It's our normal state. The undeniable truth we can take refuge in as a starting point is that we exist. He takes aim at the underlying insecurity that causes humans to flail and sink into despair: "One pathological symptom of the western world in general and America in particular is its preoccupation with the idea that we are in constant need of therapy."

Unitive activity, or yoga, means proceeding directly without the inhibitions of self-doubt. In other words, self-acceptance. Although our necessary self-esteem gets pummeled in the

transition from childhood to adulthood, it can and should be recovered. From Nitya's perspective, seeking therapy implies you aren't okay, so you're starting with a negative assumption that undermines your mental health. Yogic life is direct. Fantasies, to the extent they divert us from forthright living, are detrimental. He warns us:

The life of an organism is not to be lived for all eternity. Disease, disintegration and death are as natural and meaningful as birth, growth and change. There can be a fantasy arising out of and centering around any of these six aspects.

This is a great way to take a close look at our fantasizing. Death, especially, inspires all sorts of fantasies that almost everyone swears by as certain. What would happen if we simply admitted we had no idea what came after death? One thing is those externally-installed beliefs would stand out for their lack of substance.

Bill brought us back from this brink to the experiencing of beauty: how it comes out of a sense of awe, and the sense of awe comes from the feeling that something is a mystery. Our fantasizing comes as a way to explain that, and for him it puts that in a context that's a real feeling of reverence. The mystical gives him a positive context for his reverence.

I feel that Nitya's point is that a unitive state doesn't have to be explained. Explanations remove you from the experience, take you a step away. So we need to resist the drive to explain everything. He's inviting us to stop making a story out our experience, and simply live it.

Steven suggested the word 'fantasy' can mean different things than just someone projecting an imaginary situation. When a scientist is constructing a hypothesis, it is an imaginary construct in their mind, yet it's essential to the learning process. Then again, we have artists letting their thoughts go wherever they want. Some philosophers argue that the capability to entertain alternate theories is unique to humans.

I've found that the science books of the present are saying that all human knowledge is theory and there are no absolute facts. The conviction we are going to nail down reality has vanished. Really, Einstein abolished it in 1905 with the theory of relativity, but it has been slow to sink in. Brain imaging has finally done the trick. We can still measure more true and less true, but final certitude is seen as unattainable. From my reading of yesterday, in Alison Gopnik's *The Philosophical Baby*:

When we think about logic, we usually think in terms of cut-and-dried certainties, absolute answers. But in science, and in ordinary life, we don't get those kinds of answers. The accumulated evidence may make some possibilities more or less likely, but it rarely gives us certainties.

However, to say there is no absolute answer doesn't mean that there is no answer at all. In fact, we can be quite certain about uncertainties, and quite precise about imprecise knowledge—we can formulate a kind of probabilistic logic. (77-8)

Steven protested that there is more to our thinking than subjective imaginings, which is surely true. In Vedanta, the subjective and objective aspects are a paired dichotomy. You can't take either side in isolation. Steven pointed out we distinguish between people who are insane, out of sync with the world, and people who look at an object and agree on what that object looks like. The physical organs that we use to draw in sense data are common, shared in our species. The commonality that allows us to feel love for one another is also shared.

While that's surely true, each person's interpretation of an experience is unique. The takeaway is to be less certain that you are right and other people are wrong, a toxic and addictive belief humans are heir to.

Andy offered that there is a conventional view of reality that is shared, and Vedanta makes room for that notion of conventional

reality that distinguishes it from fantasy or verbal delusion. Then there's ultimate truth, which is held to be a higher order of reality. Conventional reality is like scientific reality, with experiments that are reproducible by others. The evidence of our experiments gives us cultural common sense, such as seeing smoke means there is fire.

The relation of smoke to fire is my old area of expertise, so I mentioned that I was called to many buildings that were wreathed in smoke, and the source could be anything. The first rule was to not make assumptions. Occasionally the smoke turned out to be the sun shining on a wet roof, producing steam. It was never the same twice—you had to investigate and determine what was happening, and only then could you take steps to rectify the problem.

Anita made a nice point, that our shared understanding of reality is very limited. When a dog walks into a room, imagine how their nose gives them so much information that we don't get. What is the environment saying to them, or, for that matter, to other animals, plants, trees? She wanted to expand the conversation to include all of existing beings. And there may be reality no existing beings are yet aware of.

Paul held that science being an accumulation of experience, the human mind being treated as an individualized small self is like science trying to divide the whole into small measurable parts. All those truths we call reality are *relative* reality. Recently, what he saw as terrifying in the hospital, his nurses told him he was a wimp about—it was nothing. He realized his experience was more limited than their experience, which was thus less fearful. He really believed his thoughts were based on his experience, but they weren't—he wasn't looking at all of what was really happening.

Deb has been reading the book of essays by Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, which is delightfully activating her imagination, based on what she has experienced in life. She was reading a series of poems from people whose lives she will never know, and yet they speak something to her that is profoundly grounded in truth they all agree on. She realized the conflation of personal

experience and fantasizing is something that we can all relate to and share, and imagination is one of the weaving threads.

I added that, although the poem is printed identically on the page, every person has a totally unique interpretation of it, and a different reaction. For that matter, every reading by the same person will be a unique experience for them. This means that although there is a core of something indefinable that unites the experience, each experience is a personal one, sharing general parameters but not exactly replicable. And that's a *good* thing. It means life is always new and fresh, despite our tendency toward habituation and stultification.

Deb conceded the point, but added that there is something that passes between reader and writer that is somehow communicated on a human level. Right! We don't know what it is, but it works. Despite our limits in understanding, communication is going on. It's miraculous.

For Andy, we are part of how the future comes to be. The future hasn't happened yet, so you have a field of ideas about its shape, and you have an imaginative response to its potentials. You are crafting something for yourself: actualizing the present requires a lot of imagination! The future as a whole takes the imaginative input of everything and everybody. There are plenty of potential futures, and one or many come to be and others don't, and we are a part of that. So the thread or bridge connecting the present with the future is quite imaginary. In evolution it's amazing that such a variety of plants and animals have come to be, as the fulfilment (or not) of those potentials.

Speaking of highly evolved animals, there was a lot of talk about dogs, and each of us had our own theory of how to raise them. The theories struck their advocates as plausible, and had been communicated to them by wise, experienced trainers. Again, we could see the panorama of ideas and its presumed impact on actual beings. By the end of the evening, we had tiptoed into child raising and parental relations, a trove of ideas we had to suspend for later. Do we even know our own parents? Not much. And yet



they are intimate to us, and we have keen insights into them. What magic is this?

It seems to Nancy that every moment has imagination in it. She's always wondering *what am I going to do next?* Getting from moment to moment is like solving a problem: you aren't knowing, but you are imagining what you will be doing.

Steven mused how he's found retirement to be a stage in life where imagination comes to the fore, because you have to refashion your life, find a purpose, a set of values, and it's wide open. There's no 9 to 5, no boss, you are your own master. He finds himself imagining a lot about how to structure this stage of his life, what potentialities does he want to bring out, what pathologies does he want to leave behind? It's exciting to him, but he doesn't want to make mistakes, wants to make the right choices.

Bill responded drily that it's a fantasy that you have control over something, and Deb agreed that the biggest fantasy of all is that we have control. Our fantasies don't change how things in life come to us, or how we engage with them afterward, after they appear.

I'd say they *do* affect how we engage with things, and they play some role in what appears, though less than we might imagine. There is surely a tide in the affairs of men, and dogs too, for that matter. Where Vedanta and neuroscience are converging these days is that our best thinking is unconscious, and the conscious mind is more like an agent to carry out what is decided even before we are aware of it. The wondering and worrying can help us to hear the inner intimations, but we need to take care not to shut them off with our wishing and planning. The feelings we have about what to do are being supplied from an even more aware part of us, and feelings are how the message is communicated. It's doesn't generally show up as a clear directive in words, but we might supply words in retrospect. By working together with that insight, and following the opportunities that arise, you direct yourself as best you can. Then life is a new adventure every second, and you are simply on that journey.

Anita also retired a little while back, and she shares Steven's feelings about the possibilities. She's found her life to be like a head of cabbage, where she peels away layer after layer of identity, all the layers of who we are, the things that have created our world, to reveal what is at our core. Now she's facing the late categories in Nitya's list above, the disease, disintegration and death part, and is trying to do it with grace. She empathizes with Steven, because retirement's a whole new experience, where who we are is no longer who we were. It's both exhilarating and exciting, and sometimes overwhelming.

Nitya must have had death in mind as the real fantasy-producer in his list, since as we approach it and have intimations of it, so many fantasies address it. Our world is brimming with them, so they are bound to come up, no matter what your current beliefs are. I've had a number of near-death experiences, and they were unbearably real. Not theoretical. Any speculation about "what happens next" is irrelevant at those moments, and didn't seem true. It was just empty ideas.

Deb just received a lovely letter from her dear old friend Jane, part of which speaks to our discussion:

Dear Debbie,

Sometimes it feels like my brain and my heart are about to burst. The longer I live, the more intensely I love the world. Do you know what I mean?

When I reflect on the changes Time has wrought, I think the primary one for me is the diminishment of self-consciousness. It was so painful and noisy in my youth; a heavy, burdensome coat of snow that I carried during the long days of my youth...

Carried or lugged like a shield. Why? Did I fear the world would burn me? It did, but perhaps what it burned off were the parts I didn't need—like vanity, ambition.

But with time, the brittle part fell away. Losing became liberation. Inside the brittle chrysalis—who knew that invisible

thing inside could fly everywhere, across borders and centuries and even gravity! In becoming invisible it becomes possible to spread like a cloud or the rain that spills and all of it goes where it is meant to be.

Nitya was an exemplary living being, who taught us the more you hold on to fixed notions the more static they become. He was always ready to amend his opinion in the face of new information. His thoughts on getting along are archetypal here:

Interpersonal relations do not manifest as a fixed relationship between morbid entities in a static situation. Rather they are dynamic through and through....

Your relationship with me is analogous to a stirring in the lake of my consciousness, which comes to the surface as an agitation that is either pleasurable or annoying. It causes receding circles of emotional ripples, each of which is experienced as a fading out shadow of the other. Even when one shadow fades out, another is at the core to stimulate a new interest or to cause a fresh annoyance. In short, the interpersonal relation is not between two individuals; it is between two series of individuals.

Deb described a favorite theme of hers from Wallace Stegner's book, *Angle of Repose*, that we become different people to the different people that we know. Certain things in us are only evoked by one certain person, that interplay with them. And other people evoke other aspects of our self, and we of them.

A good way to understand this is that we are not so much static individuals but electromagnetic fields interacting. Speaking of which, Nitya describes the ordinary attitude as if it is his own, though he himself would often do the opposite:

Even when I do not objectify myself, I am in full sympathy with myself, to pity myself or protect myself or to become my

own salesman. When you hate me, I want you to know I'm not the person you think I am. When you love me, I want to assure you that I am the person you love.

Nitya had gone way beyond self-pity, guardedness, or self-promotion by the time we knew him. I've witnessed firsthand how if someone insulted him, Nitya would agree with all their accusations. And if there was too much love in the air, he would be ready to take off, in the way that the like poles of a magnet repel, as in this excerpt from *That Alone*:

This is something I personally experience as one of the major issues of life. It comes up in people with whom I have been talking or writing to for some time. Unknowingly they try to adjust their life movements in such a way that they can be with me more, have long periods of association with me, or even have their life dedicated to a certain cause which I somehow represent to them. But the "certain cause" is imaginary—what they are drawn to is an actual person with whom they feel a sense of security. When they begin to plan like this, I see the absurdity of it. I am after all only a bubble that may burst at any moment. They will also burst, but they are thinking of permanent possibilities, one being that this man will live forever or at least as long as they want him to. They don't think that this bag of gas can blow at any time. When they start planning like that, I also start planning—to get rid of them.  
(546)

Bill concluded how we don't really know the other person, what we know is our fantasies, how we perceive them. Deb wondered how much we even know our parents. It struck a chord, and it was apparent we could go very far into it, but time was up. Bill suggested that interpersonal conflicts were a perfect opportunity to work on our equipoise, and we left it at that.

## Part II

Beverley shared a poem for the occasion:

Sometimes it feels as though a cloth  
has been thrown over  
the birdcage of my mind.

Sometimes - just now and then -  
my wings unfurl, the door clicks open  
and I am flying.

Caught by the wind  
I rise I rise  
into the heart of the sky.