

11/2/21

In the Stream of Consciousness – Part Two

Chapter 17J – What Else Do You Need? Can't You Recognize My Voice? and Images of Truth

Three vignettes that go together quite nicely formed our celebration topic for Nitya's 97th birthday, apt since 97 is not only a prime number but a mirror prime, in company with 79. Nitya was prime through and through. Primo!

To Deb, the first two stories contrasted an inner and outer vision. In both it's important to discover where the heart is, one featuring a beautiful scene and the other a dialogue with a guru, using words that bring out beautiful thoughts. She asked the class, what is it that speaks to you or appears to you that elicits beauty and reverence?

Bill, still brimming with Patanjali, was ready: in his commentary on the Yoga Shastra Nitya talks in several places about gratitude, and it's really apparent the gratitude he has for Nataraja Guru. Bill also commented about the connection beauty makes with a real essential part of your being, and that's where joy lies: joy that you want to encourage for yourself, and also to share as a responsibility to the other people you're with.

Steven recalled that last week's class ended on this same note. We were talking about the importance of beauty for a sense of the good life. He's been wondering what is it about beauty that makes it so integral to one's spiritual path? He senses an inner transformation when he's intently focused on an aesthetic experience. He gave an example of listening to a Japanese woman performing a Chopin piano concerto, for the competition in Warsaw. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcXEL-D-M5Q&t=582s> .) As he was watching and listening, he felt himself raised to a different plane of existence. It was such a great feeling, he wants to know now what the power is that enables music to lift us up like that?

While the wheels began to spin in a baker's dozen brains, Susan knew the answer: it comes from losing the subject/object duality. She's felt that identity herself with her beloved choral music. Once you forget you are a listener, you are swept up in the music and profoundly affected. Her acumen laid the groundwork for the rest of the evening's conversation.

Anita knew the feeling: "When I watched my great-granddaughter laugh for the first time, it was so joyful and free and honest, I just lit up." The child was laughing in delight at the dog. Anita earlier had watched a video about animals and their friendships with humans, and saw how that kind of connection brought the same kind of joy, revealing the divine in every creature.

Kris chimed in that babies, puppies (she has one), anything you love, creates a feeling that floods through you, which is why you love that person or that thing. She remembered how at her Dad's funeral she felt his joy coursing through her, which was something he had been able to teach her, and for which she is eternally grateful.

Karen had a similar blissful experience this week: her granddaughter gave birth to a little boy, and she got to be with them the first two nights. Karen reveled in the newborn energy, knowing there's nothing like it, it's such pure love. She got to hold the baby for an hour and a half while the mom got some sleep, and it was the most blissful possible time.

Babies were a theme for us. I always jump at the chance to reprise my favorite Tagore quote: "Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man."

Jan related how early on, in studying this philosophy, she had a special experience where she felt that rapturous joy. She had gone camping with her daughter Mira, and they were watching the sunset together. She was thinking about the new ideas she was learning in the Gurukula, and it took her into a deeper place in herself, where she felt she was in the moment. It was ecstasy, a very loving feeling.

Anita admitted that during these last months she's had a lot of medical challenges, but she is so grateful for her friends—they are like angels who come to help you. Their willingness to be there to give her companionship and support is a beautiful thing. While they're present they have no desire to do anything else, and Anita sees great beauty in their selfless giving.

Deb contrasted those welcome feelings with how, when you're really angry or sad, your world becomes very small. The expansiveness of music or love lifts you out of the subject/object duality of separation.

I reprised part of the conclusion from the last class, that beauty is the English word for ananda. In *saccidananda*, which is the definition of the Absolute, *sat* is truth, *chit* is justice or the *comprehension* of truth, and beauty is the *ananda* aspect. It's a circular definition: whatever ignites our joy is attuning us to the absolute value, and we attune to an absolute value in order to ignite our joy. We don't have to decide what it *is* and make it happen, it's available in whatever we're doing. Of course, babies and art make joy much more easily accessible, but we can make ourselves available to it almost anytime, with an open attitude. Newborns of all species—it's amazing what they bring to us, how they communicate something special we love to be called back into.

Grandpa Bill noted the joy is even more intense if the baby is in your family.

That's right: it's the same principle as loving music that's especially familiar and understood by us. We all have our tastes, and while they are limiting in one sense, in another they help us get the most out of our experiences. We love what's "mine" more than what isn't. Ideally we shouldn't, but in reality we do. In a world of exclusivity, we certainly have more access to what's "ours" than what isn't, and that's something worth working on.

I have always pitied art and music critics, as they have to maintain a sense of duality to do their job properly. They have to sit in judgment, incorporating comparisons and ratings, and so are never quite able to let go and abandon themselves to the direct

experience. The best ones can to an extent, I suppose, and that's what makes them the best.

One of Nitya's primary teachings was that the glory of the Absolute resides in everything, and, for that very matter, the principle of the guru is in everything.

While Steven was listening to the Chopin, he allowed the music to overtake him, and he had a different sense of time, as if it was standing still. Contributing to his absorption was the fact that the audience was sitting with rapt attention, so it was almost like a group meditation, utterly focused. With just the sound of the piano, it was a rapturous aesthetic experience.

Time is inherently dualistic, that's why it's made up of seconds. Steven wondered if I was joking, but only half way. Nitya taught that time is measured in seconds because there is no time with the first, the immediate experience. Time comes into being only with the second tick. Duration begins.

I'm kind of a clearing house for psychedelic reports, and in them the distortion or erasure of time is a common feature. Recent accounts I've read describe seeing the world like you did when you were a child: everything is vivid and immediate, so there is no need to explain or describe them; you're too busy drinking it all in. The medicines switch off the inner critic for a stretch, making it easy to be at one with the environment. This is possible in lots of ways, meditation, art, creative endeavors of all sorts; mountain climbing and other sports, whatever floats your boat and doesn't get your goat.

Susan has enjoyed that merged sensation from the piano concerts at Lincoln Hall, where she used to have a seat in the darkest, most recondite corner, up at the back, so it was super easy to not think of herself and just *be* the music.

Bill talked about the second story, Can't You Recognize My Voice? how when Nitya wanted to go back to his guru, he was reminded that the Guru was in all gurus, so he didn't have to go anywhere. It brought up the question of what is real wisdom and

what are merely transactional ideas. Once again: how do we know truth, and where do we find it?

It occurred to me that Nitya included this story, which Moni told us was an incident that actually happened, because he might have intended it for his students who were being lured away to other scenes, with better advertising campaigns. He was disappointed, I know, that after freely giving his best efforts to people for substantial lengths of time, the pressure would get to them or they just didn't jibe with it, and they'd take off. There were plenty of alternatives in those days, but Nitya was right to see many of them as inferior. Some were really toxic! But he didn't cajole anyone; they were as free to go as they were to stay. Yet it's tough when you love what you have to offer, and it doesn't have the same ennobling effect on many of the people you encounter. Accepting it isn't for everybody, was part of his learning curve. And comparing the different approaches of alternative teachers is educational in its own rite.

Having come to a good stopping point in the discussion, we read the third story, a bit of an odd duck, Images of Truth. Deb helped us grasp the point the swami was referring to, that most Indian art is not naturalistic, but is a symbol or guide to symbolic truth, meant to evoke in you the rapture that the philosophy conveys, bringing you to a sense of elation and understanding. All those different deities are not just aesthetically beautiful but philosophically profound as well. I added they are not just out there but in us, embodiments of our archetypal consciousness.

In *The Intelligent Man's Guide to the Hindu Religion*, Nitya discounts the charge of idolatry in statue worship, asserting you are putting all your finest ideas, your love, into the statue, in a process of union that is a valid expression of your deeper inner self. The next story in the book, Idols Have No Teeth, addresses this very nicely.

Steven has a somewhat different take. He senses a certain power in ritual, and has an altar he fills with images or flowers or incense that he finds very helpful to create a sacred space. If you

look across religious traditions, they have in common spiritual beings, music, lights, candles, and so on, which seem to elicit a feeling of reverence in the worshipper. He looks at his altar in terms of pragmatics, of what works, as opposed to investing any of it with magical power (we'll leave that distinction for another day). Steven believes that when people create sacred spaces, they're trying to provide something aesthetically beautiful that can evoke spiritual sentiment, where you step out of the limitations of your everyday ego and start to feel like a different being.

Paul has a tendency to allow himself to melt or become one with something beautiful, and for him it's a very personal matter. He was watching a science show recently that featured fast motion scenes of mushrooms growing, and also of a rotting corpse rapidly disintegrating to nothingness. He realized how beautiful the process of decay was, which we normally ignore or avoid when we can't perceive the changes. He lamented that we push away and repel beauty as often as we embrace it, unwillingly avoiding things that could show us another side of life.

Jan was reminded of the dictum *tat tvam asi*, you are that, reminding her that sensing something beautiful is not only out there, it is in you too, and how that can be very profound if you really stop to let it in.

Steven grappled with the way philosophers try to understand or determine what is beautiful, and there are formal properties that things that are beautiful have. A thing of beauty is complete within itself, it doesn't lack anything. It's in a state of perfection. That means the Absolute is full in itself.

Deb agreed with Paul: when we look at something repellent, if we can look in a different way, there is a beauty in it. Much of contemporary art was initially dismissed as not beautiful because it didn't measure up to standards of classical art. Beauty should not be confined to a definition, no matter how generous.

I feel that having formal parameters for art is akin to being a critic, and that isn't the way to creative, or spiritual expression. The trick is to get to that state of mind by your own efforts and

anti-efforts, not that some configuration will magically put you in that state of mind. However you go about it, that's the point. If you sit there and judge, you are distancing yourself from that kind of experience. This attitude is based on the premise that everything is complete in itself.

There is a voice in our head that prods us to defend established ideas of beauty, basically a megaphone for peer pressure. Creativity is promoted when you can still that voice and tune in to your deeper, more authentic nature. If you can trust that it doesn't have to be just so, you can let it run wild within yourself, and the results will be original, if not spectacular.

There are plenty of citations of the perfection of all. Here are a couple of my favorites:

Long Chen Pa, on The Natural Freedom of Mind:

Since everything is but an apparition
perfect in being what it is
having nothing to do with good or bad,
acceptance or rejection,
one may well burst out in laughter.

Atmopadesa Satakam, verse 88

Everything is real in itself; one who grasps the basic truth
will understand all this as one;
if not known introspectively,
maya's great enmity certainly creates much confusion.

That said, there is a finishing point in art that we are working up to before it is ready to be the art we imagine. Andy went right to that critical issue, asking Deb when she is writing a poem, how does she know that it's done?

Deb replied, the poem tells you, or you have to go back and keep working. After letting a poem sit for a while, if you go back

you can easily see some adjustments that need to happen. She gets a feeling of That's it! when a poem is really finished. Yet in a way, the poem writes itself. Stellar poet Mary Oliver, in her book on writing poetry, confesses to rewriting each of her poems 30 or 40 times before it speaks in the way she intends.

Moni said that each person enjoys the poem in their own experience. The poet writes, puts it out there, and now it is yours. In concert with that, Deb cited the Japanese concept that half the poem is made by the poet and other half by the reader.

Andy well knows that you are aware before you finish it that the art is undone, that it needs something more, and you're going to hold on until it shows up. Deb agreed, and added, sometimes you know what that something is and sometimes you don't.

So, projects are *beautiful* all the way along, but they aren't complete until the end. In artistic endeavors, like being alive, the final product is unknown, though often fantasized about.

Steven recognized there is something similar happening in painting. How do you know when a painting is done? He, too, has found the painting tells him when it's finished. That's his idea of perfection, that once any artistic object has that sense of perfection, it lacks nothing.

Andy mused that if you walk down the street and the existence of the Absolute is infusing everything with its own divine being, it requires no adjustment whatsoever. Yet he agrees that you know when a picture is done and when it's not done. He tries to hold out for the duende, the spirit infusing art, telling himself doesn't the world have duende already? (There are some definitions of this word in Part II, and an email exchange between Deb and Andy about it. Worth a peek.)

In the spirit of duende, Deb said there is always something surprising and unexpected that expresses why she wrote the poem. Yes, the world has duende everywhere, but how we express it is new every time.

As I've said before, neuroscience is catching up to this folk wisdom and the ancient rishi wisdom, at long last. My former son-

in-law told me of the day in 1999, when his professor walked in to the lecture hall and said, we've been wrong all along. Our whole field has just changed. Thanks to fMRI they could see that new neurons appear all through life, and also that the brain does a massive amount of processing before delivering its verdict to the "aware" part of consciousness, which then takes credit for the whole business. Why not? It's efficient that way, except when there is a miscommunication, and the ego goes off on a tangent or six. My point here is that the feeling of completion is also delivered from the Great Artist within, who is masterminding our poems, our paintings, our gardening—our life. Being "done" is a feeling transmitted to the surface to halt further work, at least for the moment. Not being done is another feeling. Being in tune with our feelings enough to properly recognize and apply those intuitions is an advanced skill, something we can practice in every walk of life. It's our 24/7 meditation.

It is a terrific basis for gratitude, by the way, recognizing the divine spirit of creativity coming through our thick skulls to us, poised as we are on the outer edge.

Moni is excited that now some scientists are thinking that art is not generated only by the brain, but consciousness itself is helping the whole thing manifest. She also saw a program where a poet said, "I don't write it, it is coming through me." When a poem comes through him, he is as surprised as anyone.

So many great artists, musicians and just plain folk feel that their creations arrive from "somewhere else." That somewhere else is right inside them. We don't know where it all starts, but we can see that most of the production is screened off from our clumsy and interfering ego, until it's ready for prime time. Then we might imagine we've just come up with it.

Steven could really relate. He just finished a painting, and was surprised that it was suddenly complete: without his having any intention, it just finished itself. He had a feeling of humility: "I didn't do this." His next painting was a different experience. He kept changing it, and every change made it worse and worse.

Finally he threw it away. He could see that with the first he was channeling something authentic, and in the second he was trying to force something to happen that wasn't as deeply grounded, and it never got right.

Paul thought that paying attention was one of the things that interfered with birthing our true nature, but I disagreed. The ego's part is to pay attention, only not to take full credit. In actions like tying shoes, or driving a car, it's a fully automatic memory performing it, but if we don't pay attention we won't succeed. Our shoes will fall off or we'll crash. Attention is the link between the fullness of our whole mind and our body that carries out the programs.

I am privileged to go over to Andy's house every so often. He has a wall behind his desk covered with colorful illustrations of the Atmo verses. They've been up there for at least ten years, and they are utterly beautiful and original. On my next visit, many of them will be different. Andy will never be finally finished with them. The new ones are even more amazing than their predecessors.

It's a righteous way to live.

Part II

What Else Do You Need?

On a full moon fall evening my guru took me for a walk along the banks of the Ganges in a place not very far from Rishikesh. We came to a place where the river, even though the current was rapid, appeared to be still. It shone like a sheet of glass. The high mountains of the Himalayas, silhouetted by the bright moon behind them, were seen reflected in the water. The moon, peering over the mountain peaks, made the trees appear like phantom figures of exquisite beauty. The gurgling of the river sounded like the endless chanting of "aum." The hypnotic spell cast by the scene was irresistible. We both stood entranced, gazing

at the moon and the Himalayan heights mirrored in the Ganges.

After a long silence Guru turned his compassionate glance toward me and said tenderly, almost inaudibly, “The Himalayas, the Ganges and the moon coming together in the blend of one reflection. What else does man need to be inspired? The rishis of the Upanishads, Vyasa, and Kalidasa were all inspired by this trio.”

Again he lapsed into silence. Lost in a sense of ecstasy, I stood there. To me it was even a little more wonderful than what Guru had declared. I thought to myself, “The Himalayas, the Ganges, the moon and your own guru coming together to bless you in peace. What else do you want in life?”

Can't You Recognize My Voice?

Once I was sitting at the feet of Swami Akhananda Saraswati of Brindavan. The swami was speaking of the bipolar relation of a guru and a disciple. He became very eloquent on that subject, saying “The disciple should be like a chaste wife who cannot think of any other man than her husband to occupy the treasured sanctum of her loveful heart.”

At that point I got up from my seat and begged his pardon to leave the hall. He asked me where I was going. I said, “Swamiji, I am like a chaste wife. I treasure my bipolarity with my guru.”

“Who is your guru?” the Swami asked.

“Nataraja Guru is my guru.”

The Swami looked at me searchingly. “Can't you see me? Can't you recognize my voice? The same Nataraja Guru is speaking to you.”

I was more than a little put off. “Suppose a man goes to his neighbor's wife and says, ‘Can't you see me? Can't you recognize my voice? I am your husband.’ Should she accept him?”

“Certainly not,” the Swami replied. “The husband and wife belong to a transactional world of social membership, whereas the

guru and disciple belong to a transcendental context in which the personal aspect of the individual is a superimposed error that is to be effaced by wisdom. The notion of duality and the understanding of a guru are mutually exclusive.”

I bowed low in profound gratitude, and resumed my seat.

Images of Truth

While I was staying with Swami Akhananda, there was a marble statue of Lord Krishna on the altar in the prayer hall. All the devotees were offering flowers to the stone figure.

One time I approached the Swami and asked him, “Why should I worship a fixed image in a work of art when I am far more inspired by the presence of a living example of the Highest, such as yourself? I would much prefer to sit at your feet than to sit alone before an image.”

He said, “Yeah, that’s right. But one day you will come to look for me in my room, and I won’t be there. You may come after me and find me sitting on the toilet. The image of me sitting on the toilet most likely would conflict with your previous projections of holiness, divinity, and purity. I think it’s better to worship this lovely sculpture, which also represents the Highest. Whenever you approach it, it will always greet you with the same serene smile. It will never grow old or ugly or run off to sit on the toilet.”

I thought, “Yeah, that’s right.”

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Duende really captures the sense of the class investigation, being a poetic version of Isaac Asimov’s stodgier eureka phenomenon. I found a [terrific essay](#) that I wish we’d had to read out last night, from poets.org. Here’s an excerpt:

We write poems in order to engage in the perilous yet necessary struggle to inhabit ourselves—our real selves, the ones we barely recognize—more completely. It is then that the duende beckons, promising to impart "something newly created, like a miracle," then it winks inscrutably and begins its game of feint and dodge, lunge and parry, goad and shirk; turning its back, nearly disappearing altogether, then materializing again with a bear-hug that drops you to the ground and knocks your wind out.

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Duende or tener duende ("to have duende") is a Spanish term for a **heightened state of emotion, expression and authenticity**, often connected with flamenco. The term derives from "duen de casa" (master of the house), which similarly inspired the duende of folklore. [https://dbpedia.org/page/Duende_\(art\)](https://dbpedia.org/page/Duende_(art))

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From Miriam-Webster's dictionary:

1. a quality of passion and inspiration.
2. (in the folklore of Spain, Portugal, Latin America, and the Philippines) a supernatural being or spirit resembling a pixie or imp.

late 17th century (in duende (sense 2)): from Spanish, contraction of *duen de casa*, from *dueño de casa* 'owner of the house'. Duende or tener duende ("having duende") can be loosely translated as **having soul**, a heightened state of emotion, expression, and heart. The artistic and especially musical term was derived from the duende, a fairy or goblin-like creature in Spanish and Latin American mythology. El duende is the spirit of evocation.

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Deb and Andy had an email exchange after class. First she sent him the definitions she'd found, then wrote:

Andy: Thanks for your rundown on duende.

Thanks also for your insightful answer to my question last night about "when is it finished"?

What I got was: its done when something shows up that's from you, but its the larger you that you weren't aware was you.

It seems to be the culminating moment of a search for real beauty, always a mystery

I have spent the last three days trying to "finish" verse 31. It refuses to be done. I seem to need to exhaust all my rational fixing before the duende shows up.

It seems to be my job to hold out.

A couple of other things we didn't touch on, but I recalled after we had hung up.

When we were in Ooty together in 1995, and we were having those recorded art dialogues with Nitya, at one point he pulled out Plato, and showed us a dialogue on the nature of beauty. Its a minor one (I think the name is "Lesser Hippias", surely a great name for a cat!) The protagonist is a real air head, who claims to know what beauty is. Socrates corners him and gets him to admit that, although he can identify examples, beauty itself in the end is undefinable.) Ananda.

Another thing we didn't touch on is rasa, "taste", from Bharata's Natya Shastra.

Deb: Good for Socrates. Yes, beauty isn't definable just like the absolute isn't definable. And yes to that holding out until the rational mind gives up/turns aside or whatever and that surprising but just right understanding reveals itself. That itself is such a

beautiful moment. After your little stories about Bonnard I now have ideas of poems and color floating in my head. And I have a super cool book of bio on Lorca and his collected poems that Scott gave me a few years ago. I'll show it to you when you are in pdx again.
p.s. You said exactly what I meant when I was trying to describe how you know when a poem is finished.

Part III

Deb found another reference is one of her books:

[Garcia Lorca] memorably defined the concept of duende: “All that has black sounds has duende,” he wrote, quoting the cantaoor Manuel Torre. He went on, “The angel and the muse come from elsewhere...but the duende must be waked in the last rooms of the blood. You must toss out the angel and kick out the muse...the true struggle is with the duende.” He was describing that implike indwelling spirit whose presence makes all the difference between artless art and true art. The word is an elision of *duen de casa*: master of the house. The usual expression is *tener duende*—to “have duende”—and this is indeed what Lorca had. (xvii)

from *Poet in Spain, Federico Garcia Lorca*, New Translations by Sarah Arvio, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017)