

1/12/21

In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 2 – The Neurotic in the Basement and the Freak in the Attic

A category five rainstorm serenaded us in parsing Nitya's metaphor for the three levels of the mind, per Freud. While the title omits "The Regular Guy on the Main Floor," the chapter is a marvelous example of something he was always doing: discerning a psychospiritual lesson out of the quotidian events of his experience. His clever twists often brought reactions of aha! to us, followed by knowing chuckles, and once in a while they burrowed in to lodge a permanent reevaluation in our minds.

While Nitya was staying in a friend's apartment in Boston, the peace of their evening is shattered by a screaming teenager below the floor and a music freak above, playing rock and roll at top volume every waking moment. His friend assures him that if you go down to check on the screamer, the upset girl will appear to be completely normal, and there is absolutely no chance the man upstairs will turn down the volume of his passionate racket. Let's just say Nitya was not fond of noise, and considered rock and roll a horribly degraded form of music. This was tough on many of us, because those were peak years of an explosive musical community where new song forms were a central part of "the revolution."

A true philosopher, Nitya took his misery philosophically:

I felt very sad about the situation in which my friend was placed. Then I thought that in one sense we are all in a similar predicament. How many of us are free from the hysterical neurotic living in the basement of our mind? And isn't our conscious mind a lot like that music freak, continuously blaring on and on all through our wakeful state, repeatedly playing one recorded memory after another?

What can we do about our predicament? Nitya gives us a hint:

The person in our basement resembles the hysterical girl in another way as well. Suppose you're angry and you make an enquiry into the nature and cause of your anger. You'll find, to your amazement, your anger fading out and in its place a sober mind greeting you.

If we ignore or stifle our outbursts, they will persist, but if we investigate them, they will at least take on the appearance of normalcy. Jan noted that this can cut two ways. We can simply "behave" normally because of the public eye on us, or we can relieve the pressure of the underlying malaise, which is what Nitya, or Freud for that matter, would recommend. Then we have a chance of actually *feeling* normal. Norm-al.

The basement of Freud's house of the psyche he called the id, the main floor the ego, and the upstairs the superego. The ego imagines it acts independently, yet it is driven by the norms of its culture dictated from above, and the history of evolution gripping it from below. No amount of pretense can negate these influences. Nitya says of the superego:

Our conscious mind further resembles the man playing the stereo in that you can prevail upon your mind to tune to a particular memory or a chosen line of reasoning, but it is almost impossible to effectively silence the compulsion to continue playing one recording after another.

Deb reaffirmed that the id-person is in all of us, the irrational neurotic being that screams and screams, though most of us know how to cover it up. And we endure a constant stream of commentary from the superego about how we are supposed to act, which structures our cover-up.

It is well-known that most of us mask our turmoil in public, but something in us goes on screaming. Like a vast system of caverns under the earth, psychology aided by imaging techniques

continues to reveal how complicated all those Stygian depths are, and how the interactions of many, many parts participate in everything we do.

Though we take it for granted, self-awareness is a most recent development, and we humans are only beginning to become aware of our whole self. I've continued delving into *The Master and His Emissary*, by Iain McGilchrist, who notes:

Conscious awareness of the self is a surprisingly late development in evolution. The higher apes, such as chimpanzees and orang-utans, are capable of self-recognition, but monkeys are not: they fail the mirror test. (87)

Anita got the conversation rolling (and rocking), mentioning how when she tries to go to sleep at night, she often has a song going around in her head, and she can't shut it off. Susan shared her terms for this common complaint, audio virus or ear worm. It sounds like the attic music freak, but as Deb said, it's more likely akin to the neurotic in the basement, a kind of fixation. She thought if you put your attention outside that space, it might relieve the obsession. Andy suggested, by contrast, if you can empty your mind, it goes away, and then you can tiptoe back in.

I noted how similar circular mental trips happen in brain injuries, and I've experienced it in acid trips, probably tainted with speed or some other non-psychedelic, where you keep coming back to the same place and starting over. It's maddening, because you can't control it. On acid I was aware of the stuckness, with brain injury, usually you are not.

Kris cited Oliver Sacks, in *Musicophilia*, who thought it shows over-sensitivity to music, and suggests singing along with it. It's a clever notion, since trying to reject a musical virus clearly doesn't work; if anything it makes it more persistent. My technique is to hum a different tune, and after a while I find it negates the previous one. Whatever the resolution, Anita's example is a good

one for highlighting the stubbornness of our mental processes, and the challenges to our ability to control them.

Andy rightly concluded that we don't just have one neurotic in our basement, there's a whole passel of them.

Jan loved what she described as Nitya's invitation to think of our group of neurotics in terms of the myths and authors and great things that brought them about. It makes it more colorful and outside of you—not so much your fault, in other words. It's more poetic, too. Nitya asks: "How many minds are behind this expression of the present, to weave such a pattern of thought, of mood, of emotion, of poetic fancy?" He goes on:

Taking this into account, the singularity and compactness of my personality ceases to be real. Instead I become a small piece of reed fashioned by Nature to pipe through its holes the song of humanity. Instead of the individual in me, I now see an infinite range of minds belonging to many different ages and ethnic backgrounds.

Deb agreed that Nitya makes a positive jump here, posing questions like are we just a spark of this ocean of cultural development, and who are these people who have made you and me what we are? If we all thought about what or who was it who is in there nurturing us, we can know more of what's really gone into the foundation of our psyche. Jan thought a lot of the Jungian archetypes would be there, representing parts of us.

On that note, Deb related a couple of important fairy tales from her childhood, which fascinated and intrigued her, and significantly shaped her whole life. Those archetypal tales (classic losing and regaining your soul types) were early expressions of who she is. She was kind enough to write about one of them herself this morning:

One of my favorite, indelible stories from childhood was a retelling of an Indian (or possibly Persian) tale. A young

woman comes to a princely household with her new husband. They are in love, she is beautiful—but she is resented by her jealous sister-in-laws. Eventually she falls into a deep trance and nothing can wake her. The stepsisters are suspected but no one understands what has happened. Then they discover that the necklace that she always wore is no longer around her neck. The stepsisters have taken it and that is when she lost consciousness. Once they put it back on, she wakes up.

I find it strangely prescient and intriguing that the story was from India, a place that occupies a large space in my life and heart. But the story—I finally had an intuitive flash that her necklace was her soul, her deeper understanding, the atman in her. And that social ties and antagonisms took it away. Only when she was re-wakened by it, having it put back on her, did she “wake up”. In other words, she re-awakened to her own deeper self.

Andy told us about a house he goes to in his dreams. It has familiar rooms, but it’s a very long house, and the farther back you go the more dilapidated and dark it gets. You keep opening up rooms. Andy, an artist, found that the farthest out rooms in his dreams had to do with an art studio of some kind that belonged to his dad. He would open a door and find equipment back there. He realized the house was a kind of dream geography.

I have done some dream analysis for others and all the houses people encountered struck me as utterly autobiographical. For funzies, here’s the link again to four of my dreams that I eventually decoded: https://nitya-teachings.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/5/6/125633769/growing_in_the_dark.pdf . It’s on the Articles page: <https://nitya-teachings.weebly.com/articles.html> .

Anita wanted to know how we relate all that to this chapter, so I reviewed the Freudian scheme, how the attic is the superego with its roots in the past and memories—samskaras I suppose—that tell you what to do. The basement is more primal, like vasanas

or our DNA, the roots out of which our complexity develops. As we ramify, our life becomes more complex and we take on those patterns, which allow us to do interesting things. The development of the patterns is self-reinforcing; as Andy put it, it's the collective aspect to our consciousness. He assured us the collective part is not static, so we can contribute to it as individuals. (It is inevitably portrayed as static, however, so don't you believe it.) The people with historically important existences left a deposit, a collective deposit, that we draw from. They have patterned the world around us.

I talked about being raised an agnostic tending toward atheism, but when I began to scrutinize my very secular culture I realized how extensively Christianity had shaped it: it was the framework even of our atheism. I found it fascinating to see how those principles were lodged in place, binding and guiding everyone without our realizing it.

Traveling to India was revelatory in that regard, because it was shaped by a very different mindset, less compulsive, less domineering. More individualistic. I felt liberated by seeing beyond my trained impulses, and had greater access to the part of us that wants to be independent. Having Nitya as a guide there helped—many travelers bring their own culture along with them. We were invited to check that at the airport lockers, to be claimed later at our own discretion.

Now I believe you don't have to cut yourself off from your own cultural history, even as you resist the constraints built into it. It fosters much good. Shapes matter. If people didn't recognize a stroke of genius, it would not be appreciated or replicated. It has to resonate with something that already exists.

Karen was captivated by the ripples of consciousness in Nitya's poem included in the chapter (see below). She saw them as the creating force within us, and could see how it's a perfect image. Each of the ripples is just like its neighbors, impelled in the same way, yet each is having a unique journey, enclosing one spark of consciousness. If you *are* a ripple, the joy is in the

experience of expanding in all directions, and it doesn't matter that you are following a pattern. How else could it work? And you can think of it in all kinds of ways, like Nitya's reed flute being piped by the wind of Nature, or a surfboard catching the Wave of the Day. You name it. Deb brought up Nitya's term that we are *cocreators* of the universe. For that matter, how could we possibly cease being a ripple of consciousness? What is the far shore on which it will finally expire? Is there one? No one knows.

Bill waxed rhapsodic that the creation is the 10,000 things of Taoism, they are ripples coming out of the boundless inertial surface of silence: out of the absolute reality come all these ripples that make our world. Each one has its own bit of consciousness. We are conduits of the Absolute manifesting the 10,000 things, conduits for the unfolding of the universe. He cited Patanjali, who listed all the elements that make up our understanding, so many facets creating the memories that we are constantly dealing with. They comprise everything, not just the individual ripples but all the influences, including genetics, that have made up those levels of information that form our memories.

I added, if we're not inclined to probe into this, we can just ride the wave—meaning, we don't have to build a life from scratch, it's busily unfolding for us, even when we happen to spend time in the vacation state of mind. In fact, doing so makes the ride even better.

Deb touched on an old saw: ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. I don't think it's much taught in what's left of schools, but at one point it was. Once upon a time it was noticed that the embryo starts out looking like a germ, then proceeds through all the major stages of evolution one by one until it becomes the animal it's going to be. It's amazing! That means whatever evolution we manage is going to be recapitulated in the next embryo, and the next. It's another kind of magic, actually. And yes, how would we step outside of that ripple? We can't. We each have to go through everything prior to us to get here. We'd be better off being grateful for it, and exploring its ambit, which is

likely vastly larger than we imagine.

At the same time as we coast along, Jan pointed out, this chapter is asking us to go into those aspects of our trauma and try to feel them, try to transform them, because otherwise they hinder what we want to do in life. And in a way our hindrances get passed on into the culture, too. It's very important to consider the therapeutic aspect of this teaching, how we should come to love and appreciate everything, good or bad, that made us.

The class had a long talk about the present state of civilization, which is breaking apart before our eyes, and it makes us want to scream like a hysterical lost soul in the basement. We have no idea what kind of chick will emerge from the eggshell—a bluebird of happiness or a baby tyrannosaurus or.... Susan said, “I feel like I'm breaking every time I see a headline, I need to make them stop!” Jan arrived just on this stormy day to surges of doom and gloom, thinking the worst for our country. Andy mentioned he can and does get into alarmed states, but there is another calm part of him that is taking it casually, as a witness. He's all in favor of discovering your own calm observational factor, without trying to eradicate it.

Anita, surprisingly, suggested it was a time to go with the flow, like the Tao, and Deb echoed how valuable it was to have had our year of Taoism just when we so much needed it. We aren't going to stop the flood, so we just have to ride it and do what little we can. Anita felt studying the Tao helped her to realize the changes going on are not something she can change or control.

The “breaking news” cycle of interminable tension is very like the stoned guy playing annoying music. We need to turn it off sometimes. The people who make hay from endlessly grabbing our attention aren't going to stop. The Gita teaches that you have to be your own support, you have to hold yourself up. That hysterical being is you too, so this story is about caring for yourself, how we can deliver that calming, loving influence to the part of us that is freaking out. We need to settle fear by going into it and being present, instead of pretending it isn't happening. Denial is not a

river in Africa.

Understanding how vast and complex we are is a thrilling and ongoing adventure. Yes, the egg is cracking apart, and we may not survive to see what kind of chick breaks out, but it's clearly rebirthing time on the planet. Humans abused Nature past the point of tolerance. We didn't make the necessary changes, so She doing it. Stampeding the hustings is a part, apparently.

When Gary Snyder, just about the last living Beatnik, was in Portland on a book tour for his epic poem *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, we got the chance to hang out with him. One of his schoolmates from Portland's Lincoln High School asked him what's it like being 60—a shockingly old age. (He's now 90.) Snyder looked into the near distance, paused, and replied, "There's so much... material... to work with." He has thrown off the cultural parameter of an early peak and a long demise in life—for him, the longer you go, the richer you become. And he altered our worlds just by saying it. We've never forgotten that, despite the aches and pains and memory lapses, we have so much material to work with. What greater blessing could there be? Who wants to run out of material to play with?

Nitya's poem inspired our brief closing meditation, as the heavy rain thrummed and aumed on the windows:

Boundless inertia
lay asleep
on the breathless surface
of unfathomed silence.

When the first throb
of a vague dream
caused a gentle stir
in the heart of cosmic inertia,
there arose from its
frozen stillness one gentle ripple,
then another and another,

each encircling the primal event,
Each ripple was crowned
with a golden peak of consciousness,
and in a hushed voice
the ripples exclaimed
“The dawn of creation!”

Part II

Now that she’s caught up on the Notes and even read the assignment, Dipika sent a fragment of Pink Floyd’s song Brain Damage:

The lunatic is in my head...
there's someone in there
but it's not ME