

Fear and the Human Condition

“This fragment of your mind is such a tiny part of it that, could you but appreciate the whole, you would see instantly that it is like the smallest sunbeam to the sun, or like the faintest ripple on the surface of the ocean.... Think how alone and frightened is this little thought, this infinitesimal illusion, holding itself apart against the universe. The sun becomes the sunbeam’s enemy and the ocean terrifies the little ripple.” From The Course in Miracles.

Many of the great writings of mankind have enjoined us to put aside fear. The prophetic angel heralding the birth of Jesus said, “Be not afraid, for I bring you good tidings of great joy”. A young president of the United States once used the phrase, “There is nothing to fear but fear itself”. Unfortunately, most humans today are afraid. So many people seem unable to focus on “good tidings” or “great joy”, but are, instead, drawn to fear itself. If we read the newspapers today, listen to a radio news broadcast, or watch a news broadcast on television and count the number of times we hear the words “fear” or “terror”, we begin to realize that fear is the new focus. Some people even seem to capitalize on the increasing fear in the world, using it to serve their own ends. (I was recently tempted with a mail notice soliciting psychologists to serve their country by joining the Army reserve as an officer who would provide anxiety counseling to troops. The card offered a \$30,000 signing bonus.) A vast majority of people do seem alone and frightened, setting themselves apart from the universe and the body of mankind. Without the focus of love in their lives, people, unfortunately, are drawn to any means at hand to avoid fear. We often do not see that we won’t have to avoid fear if we don’t give in to it. If we focus on the strongest emotion, love, we won’t feel fear and thus won’t notice all the lesser emotions associated with it.

Love is a complete joining and connecting with life. Fear is a distorted attempt to cling to life by judging some aspects of it as unacceptable, and attempting to separate from those aspects.

Fear is generally experienced as an unpleasant emotion. Physiologically, it causes a cascade of neurotransmitters and hormones to be released which trigger rapid heartbeat, sweating, dry mouth, stomach upset, tense muscles and a vague feeling of impending doom. Rather than working to prevent these feelings, many people today become entangled in fear and then try to alleviate the symptoms. I see children in my private practice as young as 7 years old who find it difficult to function at school or at home because of paralyzing fear. I always begin my interview with their parents asking them to tell me about their own fears and how they deal with them. Most of these parents are either trying some form of medication to get symptom relief or are not consciously acknowledging their own fear. They are simply keeping themselves impossibly busy in order to distract themselves from their unpleasant feelings of fear. Sometimes they are very focused on external means of combating fear. They install burglar alarms, break-in proof locks and motion detectors. These things are all done in an effort to keep bad things out. In the end, they trap people inside with their fears. In their attempts to

control the external world, these parents unintentionally convey irrational levels of fear to their children. I currently work with a teenager who is afraid to go to the mall because the railing on the second floor could suddenly give way and she could fall over it and be killed. A ten-year-old is afraid to go to school because one or both of his parents could be killed in a car accident while he is not with them. In my work with these families, I encourage them to begin to focus on love, rather than avoiding fear. I ask them to begin a daily practice of listing all the things they are thankful for in that day.

I define love as the polar opposite of fear. It is the emotion which gives, but doesn't take; which accepts, but never demands; love is the heart of gratefulness; it is thanksgiving for all things, with no judgments. When my heart is full of love, I do not feel anger or fear or sadness. As I look out my window while writing this, I can see blue skies, tall evergreens, squirrels and birds in the evergreens, another house, workers coming and going as they carry out their job renewing the house, a fence, our dog chasing squirrels along the fence. Looking at all these things, I see only one common denominator: life. Any thought which seems to separate me from all of this brings fear. When I feel a part of all of this, I experience life, which is love. When I focus on our dog running up and down the fence, I feel life and joy. If I let my mind wander to the recent death of our other dog, I begin to feel fear. What if our present dog gets ill and dies? When I allow my thoughts to move in this way, a dark cloud passes over me and I cease to feel the connection with life. I suddenly feel the need to cling to life, which makes me afraid. Life does not need me to cling to it. It simply is. When I cling to it, I cease to enjoy it. To simply be in life's presence, moment to moment, is love. There is nothing to be afraid of in this state.

An interesting phenomenon which is coinciding with the increasing focus of fear in the world is the rise of a condition known as autism. In the last 10 years there's been a dramatic rise in this condition. Twenty years ago a newborn child had a 1 in 5000 chance of being diagnosed with autism. Ten years ago, the number increased to 1 chance in 2000. The current estimate is a staggering 1 child in 163 new births will be diagnosed with some form of autism. The Center for Disease Control in the United States has declared autism an epidemic. For those unfamiliar with the condition, the core symptoms are severe dysfunction in communication, social relationships and restricted repetitive or stereotyped patterns of behaviors or interests. These are the diagnostic symptoms listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition (DSM-IV). As a result of these symptoms being manifest in one individual, the child is most often seen as very withdrawn. They've been referred to as islands unto themselves, children trapped in their own bodies, beings unable to get out, buried alive, or disconnected. Seemingly unable to respond to affection or social overtures from others, these children remain lost in their own worlds. In some cases, these children seriously physically harm themselves. They appear to be pure versions of the "smallest sunbeam to the sun" or "the faintest ripple on the surface of the ocean".

Interestingly, the DSM-IV omits the core emotion experienced by all children on the autism spectrum: severe anxiety. The following are quotes from books written by autistic adults or their parents:

“I sat down and suddenly felt a wave of terror unlike any I had ever felt before. ... For several years after that, the presence of other people around me would be terrifying.”

“And I was scared because, well, because I was *always* scared.”

“The more I became aware of the world around me, the more I became afraid.”

Referring to her daughter, one author writes, “One thing was clear. She was terrified.” (Her daughter was only two years old at the time).

“Fear is a universal emotion in the animal kingdom, because it provides an intense motivation to avoid predators. Fear is also a dominant emotion in autism. “

“I was born with a pervasive fear that never seemed to diminish, so I spent most of my earliest years devising ways to lessen the unrelenting terror, if not get rid of the chronic dread completely.”

Because they are so isolated, they feel incredible, unrelenting fear. Even within themselves, they are separated. The brains of autistic individuals have very highly developed capacities for a variety of sensory input from the external world, but little capacity to connect the sensory input in one area of the brain with sensory input in another area of the brain. As a result, it is as if they are receiving all channels of a television at once, with the volume at full. They are unable to filter information and take in only what is needed for the particular situation. One autistic adult says that autistics are specifists, while neuro-typicals are generalists. The non-autistic brain is able to focus on the sensory information needed for the situation and filter out un-needed information. This capacity is essential for survival of the organism. We must pay attention to the most important information at one point in time, with primary focus always being given to any information indicating that we may be in danger. Because autistics are unable to filter out “background” information, everything coming in is reacted to by their brains as if they were in danger. They quickly develop many strategies for protecting themselves, but never feel safe because they never feel relief from the perception that everything in their environment is a threat. Attempts by parents, therapists and educators to “break through” are experienced as a serious threat to their safety and are often reacted to in seemingly bizarre ways. In reality, they are simply engaging in the fundamental survival behaviors of the organism: flight, fight or freeze. In practical terms, we see autistic children freezing, becoming very aggressive or trying to escape when someone tries to hug them or speaks to them directly. Freezing usually takes the form of shutting out the world by focusing on one tiny detail of the environment, in order to turn off the unbearable sensory information. Some children will flap their hands in front of their face or spin objects while staring at them. In addition to being unable to filter out irrelevant information, they are unable to synthesize various pieces of information. Unable to synthesize, they can only see parts and cannot see “the whole”. In practical terms, this translates into an inability to realize that their hand is part of their arm, which is in turn part of their body. In the same vein, they cannot see that the hand on the end of their

parents' arm is part of that arm, and that the arm is part of a body that makes up the whole known as "mom" or "dad". Autistics see an extreme version of separation, where, not only are they not part of "the body of mankind", their own hand is not part of their body. They live an extremely magnified version of the sunbeam which holds itself apart from the sun, afraid that the sun will devour it.

Prior to the biological and neuro-physiological research which became possible in the 1980s, autism was considered a severe psychiatric disorder attributed to poor mothering. One particular researcher coined the term "refrigerator mother" and indicted mothers of autistic children as the cause of their severe disabilities. Research is rapidly growing in this field with the current focus being primarily on causes of autism, prevention of autism, and treatment of autism. Research into the causes currently focuses on genetics and environmental toxins. A majority of children on the autism spectrum have some type of food allergy or other serious immune system dysfunction. In other words, they seem "allergic" to their very existence in human form. A great deal of research has recently focused in the area of childhood immunizations, especially the measles mumps rubella vaccination. Onset of the condition autism seems to occur around the same time as vaccinations, which has led many to question the possibility that vaccinations are the culprit in a number of children. However, no definitive research has supported this hypothesis. Many researchers focus on the possibility of a genetic tendency toward autism being triggered by vaccinations in crucial stages of development or some other type of environmental toxin. Most well supported research indicates that the brains of autistic individuals are very different from so-called "neuro-typicals" and that these differences in brain structures and function would most likely occur somewhere in the second trimester of development. Much of the research in neurobiology tells us how this happens in the brains of autistic individuals. What it doesn't tell us is "why". Why now? Why such a dramatic increase worldwide?

The staggering increase in autism, interestingly, seems to coincide with the increase in fear in today's culture. With so many people focused on fear, it seems possible that more and more children are coming into the world to tell us, "This is what fear in its extremity will do. This is what complete separation from the body of mankind looks like". In a book about raising her autistic daughter, one author states: "Autism isn't an exotic disorder, out there somewhere on its own, the fault of mercury or inoculations, waiting to be "cured" if we throw enough money at it. Autism is an exaggeration of what lies in us all." The capacity for extreme separation does lie in us all. If we focus our minds away from love and connection, we will become more and more separate from the body of mankind and more and more fearful of being part of that body.

While disabilities are the primary concern of parents and therapists who work with autistic children, it is interesting to note that many of these children also have extreme talents. Some of them have been referred to as savants, or geniuses, in areas such as music, art, literature, dance and science. What might these individuals be able to contribute to the world if they were connected to the body and not so paralyzed by fear? The creativity of life flows within them, but they are often blocked from manifesting their creativity in the world. The increase in autistic children in the world's culture seems to

say, “This is what the world will look like when fear is the core emotion. This is how things will look if each individual becomes truly separate from the body of mankind.” We will be able to perform many amazing feats in many professions, but we will not be able to connect or relate with each other or communicate with each other. Each “other” will be seen as the enemy.

The Course in Miracles states, “There are only two emotions: love and fear. And fear is the absence of love.” It's interesting to note that the people responsible for the theory of the “refrigerator mother” in the 60s may have had some notion of what was happening. In some distorted way, perhaps they sensed that a lack of love was the fundamental problem. The lack, however, was not necessarily in one individual, but rather was becoming prevalent in mankind. Imagine a world where love reigns supreme. What might that look like? Each individual would be calm, closer and closer to every other individual, enjoying the constant growing potential for life and truth in love; able to see the genius within each individual intimately connected to the whole. When someone, as a member of the whole body, provides something that brings joy or comfort to others, the provider also feels the joy and comfort. It does not matter who the provider is, because all are a part of the whole body. If we all become like the autistic child, we might produce our gifts only for our own benefit, unable to comprehend that there is a body out there which could also benefit from our gifts. Each time we withhold our gift from others, we mentally separate a little more from the body of mankind. With each act of separation, we become increasingly frightened. To become completely separated from all other parts of the body, like the autistic child separated from awareness of their own body as a whole, would truly be hell on earth.

What is the answer to this dilemma? Perhaps it is very simple. Be ourselves fully and recognize that we are part of one body; the body of mankind. Then we can be fully present and aware of what we have to offer, and then offer that gift. We offer our gifts without expectation of how they will be received and without fear. We offer our gifts without fear that someone will think them foolish or will reject them. In order to do this, it is essential to look within and be certain that we are offering a gift, not a demand disguised as a gift. Then, with a light heart and pure spirit, we share our gifts. We share with each other the gift of who we are. Together, we function as the sun, not as separate beams of light. Together, we are the one body of mankind.

In my professional life, I am a child psychologist with a recent specialization in working with autistic children and their families. Two days per week I work at a pediatric rehabilitation hospital. The remaining days, I have a private practice where I see children, families and adults. In both of my professional settings, as well as every minute of every day, I try to allow the truth of who I am to come through. In so doing, I hope to remind others of their own personal truth, so that the ecstasy of being can shine through whatever difficulties they may be facing. My essay focuses on the topic of autism and some thoughts I've had about the meaning of its increased incidence in the world today.
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