How Far You Have Come!

"Originally, you were clay. From being mineral, you became vegetable. From vegetable, you became animal, and from animal, man. During these periods man did not know where he was going, but he was being taken on a long journey nonetheless. And you have to go through a hundred different worlds yet" (17, p. 102).

According to the Sufis, only with the knowledge that perceptual development brings, can human beings know the meaning of human life, both in terms of the particular events of a person's life and the destiny of the human race.

"Once upon a time there was a city. It was very much like any other city, except it was almost permanently enveloped in storms.

The people who lived in it loved their city. They had, of course, adjusted to its climate. Living amid storms meant that they did not notice thunder, lightning and rain most of the time.

If anyone pointed out the climate they thought he was being rude or boring. After all, having storms was what life was like, wasn't it? Life went on like this for many centuries.

This would have been all very well, but for one thing: the people had not made a complete adaptation to a storm-climate. The result was that they were afraid, unsettled and frequently agitated.

Since they had never seen any other kind of place in living memory, cities or countries without some storms belonged to folklore and the babbling of lunatics.

There were two tried recipes which caused them to forget, for a time, their tensions: to make changes and to obsess themselves with what they had. At any given moment in their history, some sections of the population would have their attention fixed on change, and others on possessions of some kind. The unhappy ones would only then be those who were doing neither.

Rain poured down, but nobody did anything about it because it was not a recognized problem. Wetness was a problem, but nobody connected it with rain. Lightning started fires, which were a problem, but these were regarded as individual events without a consistent cause.

You may think it remarkable that so many people knew so little for so long.

But then we tend to forget that, compared to present day information, most people in history have known almost nothing about anything and even contemporary knowledge is daily being modified - and even proved wrong" (12, pp. 140-141).
Most psychotherapy focuses on uncovering the fantasies that shape neurotic action and on clarifying and resolving the conflicts of wishes and fears that lead an individual to the repetitive, self-defeating behaviors for which they usually seek therapy. These functions of psychotherapy are necessary and important. However, the resolution of neurotic problems, while it may be a necessary first step for an individual, is neither the measure of health nor of human potentiality. Freud's model of man as an organism seeking relief from tension, forced to negotiate a compromise among instinct, reason, and society, leaves even the most successful negotiator in a position of impoverishment as pathological, in its own way, as any illness listed in the diagnostic manual. This is because the usual psychiatric concept of health is both barren and narrow. Even the most "humanistic" of current psychologies that offer, in principle, equal attention to such dimensions of human experience as the playful, the creative, and "the spiritual," have no clear concept of the nature of the problem and little to suggest for its solution. "Self-realization" is advocated, but just what the self is that is to be realized and what that realization might be are not made explicit.

All of these therapies and theories are in the same boat because they share the fundamental limiting assumptions about man that are basic to our culture. Unwittingly, they help maintain the lack of perception that is the basic dysfunction of the human race and hinders the development of the higher capacities that are needed. In this sense, psychiatry, whether of the neurochemical or psychoanalytic variety or a combination of both, perpetuates the endemic illness of meaninglessness and arrested human development - it has no remedy for the cultural affliction that cripples normal people. Thus, we arrive at the dilemma of the group of psychiatrists in "mid-life" crisis described in part one. They illustrate the point. Their science is caught within the same closed room in which they find themselves; indeed, it helps to bar the door. Psychoanalytic theory, the masterpiece of a genius, is so powerful and encompassing a schema that all phenomena seem to be contained within its walls; its proponents have come to love their city-storms notwithstanding, and they are almost never forced to reappraise their world.

However, existentialism has helped same psychiatrists look to the underpinnings of their profession. Rychlak, writing in The American Handbook of Psychiatry, summarizes:

"Building on the theme of alienation first introduced by Hegel, and then popularized in the writings of Kierkegaard, the existentialists argue that man has been alienated from his true (phenomenal) nature by science's penchant for objective measurement, control, and stilted, non-teleological description" (p.162).

Through existentialism, purpose and meaning have come to have advocates such as the psychoanalyst, Avery Weisman:

"The existential core of psychoanalysis is whatever nucleus of meaning and being there is that can confront both life and death. Unless he accepts this as his indispensable reality, the psychoanalyst is like a man wandering at night in a strange city" (p.242).

How can the psychoanalyst find that nucleus of meaning, let alone accept it? The group of psychiatrists in mid-life crisis are missing that center because it is missing from the very discipline they practice and teach. Psychiatry cannot address the issue of meaning
because of the limited nature of its concept of man and because of its ignorance of the means needed to develop the capacity to perceive it.

In contrast, Sufism regards its task as the development of the higher perceptual capacity of man, his conscious evolution. According to Sufi authorities, the knowledge of how to do this has always existed. It had a flowering in Islam during the Middle Ages, during which the term "Sufis" came into use, but it had other names, centuries before. The Sufis regard Moses, Christ, and Mohammed as Teachers of the same basic process - their external forms and the means they employed were different, but the inner activity was the same. The traditional forms that we see around us in current times are said to be the residue of a science whose origins extend back to the beginnings of man's history. The problem is that our thinking has been conditioned to associate "awakening" to vegetarian diets, chanting, chastity, whirling dances, meditation on "chakras," koans and mantras; beards, robes and solemn faces — because all of these features of once vital systems have been preserved and venerated as if they were still useful for achieving the same goal. The parts, or a collection of them, are mistaken for the whole. It is as if a car door, lying on the ground, were labeled "automobile" and hopeful travelers diligently opened and closed its window, waiting expectantly for it to transport them to a distant city.

Meditation, asceticism, special diets and the like, should be regarded as technical devices that sometimes had a specific place in a coherent system prescribed for the individual. When used properly by a Teacher, they formed a time-limited container for a content that was timeless. Now, many old and empty containers labeled "spiritual" litter the landscape. The importation and wide use of these unintegrated forms attest to the immortality of institutions and customs, rather than the present usefulness of the activities.

The Sufis maintain that, nevertheless, amid all this confusion, the science of "conscious evolution" continues in a contemporary form, invisible to those expecting the traditional. "Speak to everyone in accordance with his degree of understanding" was a saying of Mohammed (10, p.18). Idries Shah states that he is one of those speaking now to contemporary man, Eastern as well as Western, in a way appropriate to the task of educating people who do not realize how much they have to learn. R. L. Thomson, writing in The Brook Postgraduate Gazette, agrees:

"The problems of approaching the Sufis' work are such that Idries Shah's basic efforts do seem necessary. Little help is to be found in the academic approach based on linguistics and history" (20, p. 8).

Most of Idries Shah's writings consist of carefully selected and translated groups of teaching stories, including the ones I have quoted. His translations are exceptionally clear and digestible to a modern reader. The stories provide templates to which we can match our own behavior. We accept them because they are so deceptively impersonal - the situations are preserved as the history of someone else. The story slides past our vigilant defenses and is stored in our minds until the moment comes when our own thinking or situation matches the template - then it suddenly arises in awareness and we "see" as in a mirror, the shape and meaning of what we are actually doing. The analogical form can evade the categorizing of our rational thought and reach other sectors of the mind.
The Design

"A Sufi of the Order of the Naqshbandi was asked:

'Your Order's name means, literally, "The Designers". What do you design, and what use it is?'

He said:

'We do a great deal of designing, and it is most useful. Here is a parable of one such form.'

Unjustly imprisoned, a tinsmith was allowed to receive a rug woven by his wife. He prostrated himself upon the rug day after day to say his prayers, and after some time he said to his jailers:

'I am poor and without hope, and you are wretchedly paid. But I am a tinsmith. Bring my tin and tools and I shall make small artifacts which you can sell in the market, and we will both benefit.'

The guards agreed to this, and presently the tinsmith and they were both making a profit, from which they bought food and comfort for themselves.

Then, one day, when the guards went to the cell, the door was open, and he was gone.

Many years later, when this man's innocence had been established, the man who had imprisoned him asked him how he had escaped, what magic he had used. He said:

'It is a matter of design, and design within design. My wife is a weaver. She found the man who had made the locks of the cell door, and got the design from him. This she wove into the carpet, at the spot where my head touched in prayer five times a day. I am a metal-worker, and this design looked to me like the inside of a lock. I designed the plan of the artifacts to obtain the materials to make the key - and I escaped.'

'That,' said the Naqshbandi Sufi, 'is one of the ways man may make his escape from the tyranny of his captivity'" (16, p. 176).

Teaching stories, such as the above, are tools that depend on the motivation of the user and his or her capacity or level of skill. As understanding increases, the tools can be used for finer and deeper work. The more one experiences and uses them, the more remarkable they seem to be: they lend credence to Idries Shah's claim that Sufism is a science whose boundaries contain modern psychology but go beyond it. He states:

"...Sufism is itself a far more advanced psychological system than any which is yet developed in the West. Neither is this psychology Eastern in essence, but human" (14, p. 59).
According to Shah, the initial step needed to be taken by most human beings is to become aware of automatic pattern-thinking, the conditioned associations and indoctrinated values that limit human perception and receptivity. The teaching story is used for this purpose, illustrating at one step removed, the egocentric thinking of which we are usually oblivious:

**That's Why They Bunged It Up**

"Nasrudin was very thirsty and was happy when he saw by the roadside a water-pipe whose outlet was bunged with a piece of wood.

Putting his open mouth near the stopper, he pulled. There was such a rush of water that he was knocked over.

'Oho!' roared the Mulla. 'That's why they blocked you up, is it? And you have not yet learned any sense!'" (13, p.48).

**Personal Wisdom**

"'I don't want to be a man,' said a snake.

'If I were a man, who would hoard nuts for me?' asked the squirrel.

'People.' said the rat, 'Have such weak teeth that they can hardly do any gnawing.'

'And as for speed . . . ' said a donkey, 'they can't run at all, in comparison to me'" (12, p.187).

Teaching stories such as these have clarified patterns of my own thought, permitting me to notice similar patterns in my patients and to make appropriate interventions. One such story whose content is explicit, is the following:

**Vanity**

"A Sufi sage once asked his disciples to tell him what their vanities had been before they began to study with him.

The first said:

'I imagined that I was the most handsome man in the world.'

The second said:

'I believed that, since I was religious, I was one of the elect.'

The third said

'I believed I could teach.'
And the fourth said:

'My vanity was greater than all these; for I believed that I could learn.'

The sage remarked:

'And the fourth disciple’s vanity remains the greatest, for his vanity is to show that he once had the greatest vanity’” (12, p. 47).

Having read this story, I later observed myself using the same strategy as the fourth disciple; specifically, I was berating myself for a personal failing. The context differed from the specific situation of the story but the pattern was the same. The story flashed in my mind like a mirror and I understood the role of vanity in my self-reproach. The "illumination" provoked a wry smile and ended my self-flagellation. Sometime later, I listened to a patient present a similar pattern, recognized it, and, using humor, was able to point out the concealed intent.

The point of view and the learning principles presented in the teaching stories are tough minded and emphasize the responsibility of each person for his or her own conduct and fulfillment. Such an attitude is not unfamiliar to psychiatry. However, developing a correct attitude is only the first step in Sufic science, a step called "learning how to learn." Responsibility, sincerity, humility, patience, generosity - these are not ends in themselves but are tools that must be acquired before a person can proceed further. It is what comes after this first step that sharply distinguished Sufism from all of the psychotherapeutic and "growth-oriented" disciplines with which we are familiar. The Sufis regard their system as being far in advance of ours because it extends beyond conceptual and technical limits of our psychology and embodies a method for assisting man to develop the special perception upon which his welfare, and that of the human race, depends. When asked to prove their assertion, Sufis insist on the indications that we should pay attention to the necessity for undertaking preparatory training and then experiencing the domain in question. Such claims and requirements often provoke a haughty dismissal:

Three Epochs

1. Conversation in the 5th century.

"'It is said that silk is spun by insects, and does not grow on trees.'

'And diamonds are hatched from eggs, I suppose? Pay no attention to such an obvious lie.'

'But there are surely many wonders in remote islands?'

'It is this very craving for the abnormal which produces fantastic invention'

'Yes, I suppose it is obvious when you think about it — that such things are all very well for the East, but could never take root in our logical and civilized society.'"
2. *In the 6th century.*

"A man has come from the East, bringing some small live grubs."

'Undoubtedly a charlatan of some kind, I suppose he says that they can cure toothache?'

'No, rather more amusing. He says that they can "spin silk." He has "brought them with terrible sufferings, from one Court to another, having obtained them at the risk of his very life."

'This fellow has merely decided to exploit a superstition which was old in my great-grandfather's time.'

'What shall we do with him, my Lord?'

'Throw his infernal grubs into the fire, and beat him for his pains until he recants. These fellows are wondrously bold. They need showing that we're not all ignorant peasants here, willing to listen to any wanderer from the East."

3. *In the 20th century:*

"'You say that there is something in the East which we have not yet discovered here in the West? Everyone has been saying that for thousands of years. But in this century we'll try anything: our minds are not closed. Now give me a demonstration. You have fifteen minutes before my next appointment. If you prefer to write it down, here's a half-sheet of paper'" (12, p. 26).

If history has any value as a guide, it indicates that we should pay attention to the information now being provided to us by contemporary Sufism and not pass this opportunity without investigating it. Robert E. Ornstein, in his textbook, *The Psychology of Consciousness*, concludes:

"A new synthesis is in process within modern psychology. This synthesis combines the concerns of the esoteric traditions with the research methods and technology of modern science. In complement to this process, and feeding it, a truly contemporary approach to the problems of consciousness is arising from the esoteric traditions themselves" (6, p. 244).

Psychiatrists need to recognize that their patients' psychological distress stems from three levels: a) from conflicts of wishes, fears, and fantasies; b) from an absence of perceived meaning; and c) from a frustration of the need to progress in an evolutionary sense, as individuals and as a race. The first level is the domain in which psychiatry functions. The second and third levels require a science appropriate to the task. The special knowledge of the Sufis may enable us to put together materials already at hand: our present knowledge of psychodynamics, our system of universal education, our technology, our resources, and our free society, to create the conditions that will permit the development of man's full capacities, as yet unrealized.
Bibliography


