

Introduction

Bene vive ut bene vivas.
(Live well that you may live well.)

In *The Ipcress File*, an espionage movie from the sixties, there is a scene that has lingered in my memory for decades. The main character, played by Michael Caine, works for British intelligence. In the course of the film he is betrayed and taken prisoner. He knows he is going to be brainwashed, and he is also familiar with the techniques that will be used. To maintain his grip on reality, he marks the wall of his cell by scratching it each day with a bent nail. His captors systematically wear him down, but when he senses he is finally on the verge of capitulation, he smuggles the bent nail into the brainwashing chamber and, in the midst of the session, drives it deep into the flesh of his hand. Once the ordeal is over he discovers the painful gash it has left, and puzzles, and then remembers—as he looks at the mark on his hand, the full reality of his circumstances comes back to him. Because of that mark, his life is saved.

Whether or not it has actually saved my life, I have been making marks with a similar purpose for years. Less dramatically, mine have been on paper—I have scratched out notes, questions, insights, anything that might serve as a reminder of the full reality of my world. Grocery receipts have been covered, notepads have been filled, the backs of books and envelopes scribbled on—I have even typed up little cards that I could carry in my wallet. A lot of what I've written over the years was of transient value, but I kept at it as though my life depended on it. Like the open wound in Michael Caine's hand, my notes have helped to connect me with a truth that I have always found

difficult to name, but which sustains my life and connects me to the world. Alas, when it came to living that truth, I seemed to be chronically forgetful.

Over the years I began to understand that my forgetfulness was due not so much to my personal failings, abundant though they are; it was being triggered by something much larger: the story our culture communicates and which describes the nature of reality for us. Every culture, of course, is a construct of custom and technology and language and myth and values that, taken together, create and communicate its overarching story. The stories told by different cultures often differ radically in their particulars. In the Maori tradition food is sacred, whereas we see it as a pleasurable commodity to which our bank balance entitles us; in the Japanese tradition, the belly is the seat of truth, whereas we see it as a troublesome area prone to indigestion and weight gain; the Native American tradition understands the Great Spirit to whisper through all the events of the world, whereas we see around us a world of lifeless matter whose transformations are exclusively governed by the laws of physics.

More critically than such particular differences, though, the story upheld by each culture defines a landscape of behavior and thinking as ‘normal’ and then, like a chameleon, disappears within it. When that happens, the definition is mistaken for the world itself, and passes itself off as the one true reality.

Unfortunately, the camouflaged story of *our* culture represents the landscape around us as a hostile world created by chance, and indifferent to our thoughts and the events that take place within it; it describes a strictly material reality that isolates each of us in the realm of the independent self. When that description is compared to more explicit stories that have stood the tests of time and scrutiny—those of physics, say, or mythology, or art, or psychology or the world’s spiritual traditions—we find that it is abrasively out of step with them. And yet our make-believe fantasy, which has all the substance of a canvas theater flat, stands between us and the world and confines us from it as surely as his concrete cell confined Michael Caine.

The single greatest harm done by the story our culture tells, though, comes from the divisions it enforces within each of us. We are assured in a million ways that the sensational intelligence of the body is not really worth paying attention to. And we find, indeed, that the more unmindful we become of our bodies, the more they appear to be mindless. And

so we are persuaded to separate from the body and live in the head, assured by a culture that passes off this pathological dissociation as completely normal, natural and unavoidable. Once we are caught in the prison of our craniums, we are unable to join the world—though our hearts yearn to do so. Instead of joining it, we think about it, and analyze it, and judge it. That’s just how we are, and it’s what we imagine the normal human state to be. By contrast, certain other cultures tell stories about humankind’s partnership with the living world, and foster an embodied sensitivity to it.

The way our culture lures us into our heads reminds me of the blown-glass wasp traps that people place in their gardens. These bottles have a hole in the bottom through which wasps can enter, drawn by the scent of a sweetened liquid inside; but once inside, the wasps cannot find their way out again. They buzz and bounce and fret inside the bottle, able to see and hear the world around them, but unable to rejoin it. So it is with us: as children we are lured up into our heads by the metaphors and values and implicit instructions of our culture and we become trapped there, unable to escape. Our thoughts buzz and bounce inside our craniums; we can see the world and hear it and think about it as our ideas go around and around in circles, but we have forgotten how to ‘be’ in it.

The description of ‘normal’ we have been raised on may be as hard to detect as a chameleon in a landscape, but it is always there, exerting its influence—and its effect can be felt in a sense of frustration or lack in our lives as we try to live a story that is at odds with reality. When we attempt to recover peace in our lives, our efforts more often resemble anxiety management than any kind of real peace. Being estranged from our bodies, we feel victimized by them—and so when they hurt or fall sick, we feel fear or annoyance or betrayal; and when we exert them or look in the mirror, we may feel guilt or vanity or anger about the shape they are in. And though we accept the fact of our essential solitude, we cannot bear the emptiness of our own company. To alleviate it, we surround ourselves with distractions: chat rooms, telephones, computer games, shopping, Web browsing, Twittering, and of course popular entertainment that wears meaning on its sleeve as an assurance to us all. We generally have neither the time nor the attention span for art that draws us into the unnamable ambiguities of life itself. When we try to improve our situation, we look about for answers that will help us connect and feel better about ourselves—yet

none of the self-help prescriptions seems to work for very long. Our very impulse to self-improvement often reinforces our inner division, by which the part of the self that thinks in the isolation of the wasp trap inflicts idealized patterns of behavior on our body and feelings, all in the name of mutual benefit. Our ability to escape that divided state is hampered by our difficulty in understanding that **what holds us back are the very things we accept as the normal givens of the world.***

When I was eighteen, what I wanted more than anything was to shrug off the constraints of seeing and understanding I'd grown up with, because I could feel the bricks and mortar of those 'givens' hemming me in. I left my home in Canada, went to England, bought a bicycle, and headed off on it for Japan. The bicycle seemed the ideal vehicle on which to break through the painted scrim: on a bicycle, you don't merely watch what you pass by, you belong to it. I slept in olive groves in Greece, worked in the Mediterranean on a little Arab cargo boat (the *Saint Hilarion*) with a crew of three, bedded down under the stars in the Great Syrian Desert, spent a night in an Iraqi police station as a guest of the chief of police, stayed with students in a Baghdad ghetto, toured with a Kathakali theater troupe in the south of India, and studied classical Noh theater in Japan. 'Normal' would never again be a given for me.

Through it all I wrote, committing my marks to paper lest amnesia overtake me. And slowly, over the decades, those marks began to cohere and reveal the entity I had been struggling to identify and question: the foundational story on which all the edifices of our thinking are built, the owner's manual that tells us how to relate to our own bodies and our world. It became clear that the fundamental lesion between our heads and our bodies was the prototype for all the dualities we experience in the world: between subject and object, male and female, self and world, idea and feeling, mind and matter, doing and being, man and nature, good and evil. Clear, too, that the prototype by which our heads rule our bodies establishes a tacit *hierarchy* within each duality—of head over body, subject over object, male over female, self over world, idea over feeling, mind over matter, doing over

* Throughout the book I make occasional use of both bold and italicized fonts. My hope is that the changes in font might help the reader in the way a close-up in a film helps the viewer—to pay attention differently. So please consider these fonts as an invitation to linger, to pause, to challenge, and perhaps to permit a field of implications to swarm and subside.

being, man over nature, and good (however narrowly defined) over evil. Furthermore, all of those hierarchies conform to the values of patriarchy; patriarchy itself, then, seems to be implied in the hierarchy of the idea-filled head ruling over the sensation-filled body. If that is so, then it finally becomes clear that no ‘idea’, however persuasive, can help us beyond our ruinous divisions. Wonderful books have already been written about *ideas* about culture and truth and freedom and responsibility and ecology and balance and what matters in life. All of those subjects are close to this book’s heart—but ideas, however well-meaning, tend to feed and reinforce the dominant head; even when they moderate its tyranny, they strengthen its right to rule. A basic, rarely noticed principle extends that tyranny to all we see and do: *as we relate to the body, so we relate to the world*. The body is not, as we are encouraged to believe, a mere appendage: our relationship to it actually orients our thinking. **Simply put, as long as we remain in our heads, we will remain married to the values of the head. That in a nutshell is our culture’s Achilles’ heel—and by extension, the Achilles’ heel of us all.** On that basis, this book attempts something else. First, to write about the lens by which we bring the world around us into focus—our head-centered consciousness; and second, to explore the appealing alternative: deepening our experience of the world by deepening our experience of the body.

In that this book is primarily about *the body* rather than about *ideas* about the body, it takes on a peculiar challenge. It does present ideas, to be sure, but those ideas are accountable first and foremost to experience; and that means that they are woven into the world rather than being tidied back into themselves. As such, the journey of this book is more akin to that of building a house than traveling to some far-off destination: just as the journey of building a house will traverse its footprint deliberately in myriad circuitous, overlapping paths as materials are woven together to create a space that enhances our living, so too with the ‘footprint’ of this book. Its aim is not to provide a linear argument that is logically sound and self-sufficient, per se, but to quicken readers to choices by which they can liberate themselves from the problem of our unseen normality. The book unfolds in accord with a deep organic logic; its aims and its subject matter could not be served by the structure of a more linear approach. It layers and weaves and teases out its themes, often leaning on the evidence of our senses as much as on ideas; as such it occasionally unfurls in spirals

and paradox—a tendency that can frustrate a reader insistent on a thesis with a more orderly explication. But the aim of the book is not simply to present its thesis; its aim is to help readers reflect on their own experience in a way that can help deliver us all from our isolation. As a culture, we literally have to come to our senses.

The desire to look past the wall of description and clamber out of the solitary cell of the self lies at the very heart of the age-old quest of the human soul: the quest for **wholeness**—that is, to feel the world as a whole, and the self as a whole within it, and, in feeling that wholeness, to live it. In that regard, it seems to me that *the primary freedom denied us by our culture's invisible walls is the freedom to feel the unbroken wholeness of the world to which we belong*—which happens to be the world's primary reality. Other cultures, by contrast, consider the freedom to feel that wholeness to be the foremost responsibility we have as human beings. And, sure, we know intellectually that the world is more than a random assemblage of multiple and even disparate parts; but knowing that the world is ultimately a unity is not to be confused with the freedom to *feel and live* within its unity. Once we have lost our **freedom** to feel the world's unbroken wholeness, of course, we lose the freedom to feel the self as a whole. We lose the kind of **creativity** that only wholeness can support. We also, obviously, lose our ability to be **present** with the world's fundamental reality, as well as with the fundamental truth of our own lives, which lies in our relationship to that reality.

Those three issues—*freedom, creativity and presence*—are at the crux of our humanity, and constitute the 'footprint' of this book. Like the three legs of a garden stool, those qualities are entirely interdependent: no one of them can stand without the others. And though we may think of them merely as attributes to be desired and acquired, in the way we might seek knowledge or wealth, I believe that they are actually three different facets of the phenomenon of our natural wholeness. In turn they lead to occasions of grace, spontaneity, ease, humility and clarity, all concomitants of wholeness. And I mean wholeness in the most personal sense: the wholeness of the self that lies beyond all division; the wholeness that, when we find it, expresses its truth in each of our actions; the wholeness of a body at peace with itself and in harmony with the world around it. Our culture has so accustomed us to life in the wasp trap—in which self-tyranny, fragmentation, anxiety, alienation and stunted relationships are taken as normal—that we are

in danger of mistaking as whole what is, in fact, no more than wholly normal.

Its dual concern for an understanding of the self that is holistic, and for being able to achieve an experience of the world that is holistic, aligns this book with both the ancient tradition known as the Perennial Philosophy and the newer philosophy known as Deep Ecology. Once we break free from the narrow constraints of the enclosed self, we open the door onto a sensitivity in which our union or connection with the world as a whole becomes something we clearly feel—the essence of the spiritual experience. But we are also increasingly drawn into harmony with that whole, and exposed to our responsibilities to it—the essence of Deep Ecology. To the extent that *New Self, New World* is about personal growth, it is in keeping with the Deep Ecology notion that such growth entails not just a deepening of our experience and questions and commitment, but also an expanding of our sensitivities to include all the world around us, so that the self comes to identify with the whole to which it belongs. That is true self-realization—and it literally leads us to new ways of thinking and acting and being in the world.

The book's theme of wholeness calls into question the descriptions we have literally taken into our bodies, dividing up self and world in the process. It also helps us understand the flip side of the coin: that by opening to the consciousness of our bodies we can awaken our full intelligence and come home to our wholeness, bit by bit. And to be quite clear, coming home to our own wholeness is not about establishing a private sanctuary of unity within the boundaries of our skin; it is about yielding to the radiant mystery of the felt whole that sustains us, and which we help to sustain—however it may call to us, however it may live in us, wherever it may take us. In the years it has taken to bring this book to fruition, the promise of bringing clarity to that homecoming has hung before me like a constellation, guiding its journey. And that journey has been every bit as much of an adventure for me as was that long-ago, star-crossed trip to Japan on my bike.

