

## EVERYDAY MIND AND LOVE 2018

Session 12 - September 6

This Course has been about the way we use our minds. How can we use our minds to bring us happiness (with all its many meanings) and what happens when we are not enjoying our lives, not feeling any satisfying meaning (which I think is the best thing our mind does for us)? Much of what happens in our lives is beyond our control, but we are blessed with the ability to choose how we will use our mind, until or unless that ability is taken away from us. You and I are doing that right now. It includes where we will focus our attention and what kind of values we will be drawn towards, how much time we will spend on achieving and how much on reflecting and what we do in relation to other people.

My story is that I felt I wasn't making a very good job of that in my younger days so I needed to learn some different ways of using my mind. This has been a slow process and is obviously unfinished. Over many years I've thought about what I could share with others about this journey and it seemed to be about two different kinds of learning: one **scientific** and one **spiritual**. Although I recognised these as two different aspects of my mind, it seemed important to see how the two fitted together, if they could be merged. They are fundamentally different so they can't be mixed into one substance like water and flour making dough. But surely they do combine to enrich one another as we live our lives – in our everyday experience?

I worked on the science of bodies and behaviour, in animals and humans – that was my occupation for 40 years – and I also grew more and more respectful of the unknown and how small my knowing was compared to it – that's the spiritual part, respect and love, and therefore faith and trust, in the unknown. The science can certainly be helpful, but how woefully incomplete it seems to be. Basic experiences like love and beauty seem to be beyond it; we can only speak about their impact on our lives and minds as a **mystery**. Yet, it seems to me that one's mind could not exist if it closed itself off completely to this mystery.

Today I'm talking about why we need an appreciation of beauty and what that might be like as an experience. I've asked Col Jennings – a friend, an artist, and a passionate advocate for emotional health – to share his experience with us, straight after I complete this introduction.

In the last session we considered various hierarchies of values and meaning with which we can choose to occupy our minds; remember, we have a choice. In the lower and wider part of the pyramid, the physiological and some of the psychological, operations of our mind are at least partly amenable to scientific explanations. I've narrowed these down, over many years, into the model you've heard about in the Course which is that our mind connects us in such a way that we can be the individual we are. Biologically speaking, mind enables both **autonomy** and **connectedness**, which, if you look into it, is quite an incredible feat to accomplish simultaneously. Without something called **love**, I don't think it could be done.

So, at any moment, you or I can take note that our mind has satisfied our personal needs AND connected us with other people and their doings and we might ask: how could I do either of those things a little better or in a different way? If I'm not feeling quite the person I would like to be, I am directed by this model to think about my relationships. I could ask:

how am I getting along with her or him? Then: how am I feeling about myself? Thirdly: am I in a place of trust and love regarding the unknown? This is a hierarchy too.

Connecting with the unknown obviously matches the top part of values/feelings/meaning hierarchy. Relationships with self and with others brings in lower levels and many aspects of psychology that we have touched on in this Course. In exploring this synergy between science and spirituality I think it is very helpful to note that we have distinguished a penultimate level in this hierarchy of human values and the use of our mind that is our **aesthetic sense** – our appreciation of beauty. Now, because it's up here in the ether, so to speak, we can almost ignore this aspect of mind, either deliberately or, more likely, carelessly, as we become driven by the everyday needs of our lives. I say 'almost' because our sense of beauty will still be there somewhere – it is 'as native to us as our breath' in the words of John O'Donohue.

It was Col Jennings who first introduced me to this book by O'Donohue called *Divine Beauty – The Invisible Embrace* with such beguiling Chapters as *The Call of Beauty, Where Does Beauty Dwell?* and *The Beauty of the Flaw*. 'The human soul is hungry for beauty; we seek it everywhere . . . we feel most alive in the presence of the beautiful.' And he goes on to say that 'it's because we have so disastrously neglected the beautiful that we now find ourselves in such terrible crisis.'

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O'Donohue says that beauty seems to come from beyond what we know – from the unknown. We often mistake glamour for beauty, but glamour is only skin deep. The very first effect it has on your mind is the only effect it will ever have whereas beauty is an invitation into a deeper world of meaning, knowing that you are alive for reasons other than productivity and consumption.

Because beauty happens in our experience it has to be noticed so our appreciation of it depends on where we choose to direct our attention. Iain McGilchrist believes that the left side of our brain is designed to give us the most explicit kind of meaning and in doing so it often denies us the experience of beauty. He believes that 'explicitness kills, renders lifeless.' It is our right brain that gives us context rather than abstraction, flow instead of fixity and the ability to see visual depth in art and hear harmony in music. McGilchrist warns that undue reliance on our left brain has neutralised the power of the arts so that, as he puts it, 'beauty has been airbrushed out.'

We use our right brain to appreciate nuances of facial expression. Before the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, the faces depicted in art are expressionless and stare straight ahead, but after that McGilchrist says most paintings show faces looking towards the painter's left. This emphasises the subject's left side (right brain) and puts the focus of attention in the painter's left visual field (also the right brain). He found in his research that this greater use of the right hemisphere disappeared in the Dark Ages, reappeared in the Renaissance, and has now disappeared again. He attributes the great surge in creative arts generally after the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC to a period of right brain dominance in human history. This was also the beginning of the Greek philosophy that shaped Western culture so strongly.

The growth and spread of literacy engaged more left brain activity and heightened the tension between knowing the world as a hard fact and understanding it subconsciously in terms of

myth and metaphor. Descartes, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, solidified the division between a rational mind and our bodily experience. With the Age of Enlightenment (the Age of Reason) from the 18<sup>th</sup> century we progressed to modernism and the growth of science bringing an even stronger demand for certainty. Then with post-modernism, McGilchrist feels, ‘meaning drains away.’ He suggests that our perception of art has become more self-conscious, seeing what our superficial mind thinks should be there rather than the work itself. This is especially true of music, he says, which typifies our increasing reliance on self-perpetuating technology – a lot of today’s music sounds, or is, machine-made.

The British philosopher, Roger Scruton, is even more challenging in his remarks about the diminishing awareness of beauty in the world. He says that without conscious attention to beauty we experience desecration by default. To attend to beauty we need to direct our attention away from selfish gratification towards something that makes us feel good about ourselves and our fellow humans. All our addictions, in which he includes pornography, stem from living in selfish fantasy and it’s actually quite hard to escape the ‘stimulus addiction’ that is the stock-in-trade of TV and other mass media today. Scruton deplores the realism of modern action films that he thinks are designed to produce an immediate emotional effect without much need for imagination. To find meaning you need more than immediate effect because you need to appreciate some broader context.

While these warnings are probably timely, I think the fundamental need we have to nourish our soul is such that we will continue to find beauty in the modern world and the arts will remain very much alive. The arts stimulate our imagination because our mind is searching for value and then the quality of our looking influences what we are likely to see. It is an attitude of love that will reveal for us the true beauty in the world around us and thereby strengthen our relationships with ourselves, with others and with the unknown.

Appreciating the arts is not separate from our primary task of human connectedness. In fact the extraordinary intimacy that we humans have evolved probably came about because we were also developing our artistic instincts. Ellen Dissanayake wrote *Art and Intimacy - How the Arts Began* to show that intimacy (or love) and art (the arts) evolved together. Her idea is that love is expressed and exchanged through patterns of social engagement that she calls ‘rhythms and modes,’ beginning with the mother-infant relationship. Through these repetitive interactions (looks, sounds and touches) a human being learns to love and to be loved and while doing this we also learn to create little works of art that consist of rhythms and modes. Love and art are both invitations to play, which attracts us to them.

Music, poetry and story are also essential parts of our aesthetic experience. Famous stories have changed the course of history. Biographies of Adolf Hitler describe how he was besotted with the music and the ideas of Richard Wagner, whose opera *Rienzi* had influenced him greatly as a young man. It is about a powerful Roman leader on whom Hitler modelled himself. Amongst the best-selling books of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which polarised American society and triggered huge cultural change regarding slavery just as *To Kill a Mocking Bird* changed racial attitudes around the world a century later. These are just a few examples amongst many. Even more powerful perhaps are the various creation myths of different ethnic groups and the ancient love stories such as *Tristan and Iseult* and *Psyche and Eros*.

An integral companion of story throughout our history has been song. It's fairly certain that humans have been singing and dancing together for a very long time, possibly ever since we rose onto two legs, because that freed us up to move quite differently. Steven Mithen who wrote *The Singing Neanderthal* is amongst those anthropologists who believe that singing was important for our language development. Recent research shows that there is more of the bonding hormone, oxytocin, and better synchronisation of brainwaves when people are singing together than is found in the same people in any other social situation. The elitism that distinguishes professional singers from amateurs nowadays has killed off old customs such as family singing around the piano though our need for it is still evident in the proliferation of community choirs.

The way we appreciate music is an exemplar of meaning-making in general being easier to capture in feelings than in words. Tonal images that we hear are more subtle but they are no less important than visual images. The senses of sight and touch tend to dominate so we need hearing to remind us that there is more to our world than what we can see or physically handle; heard images are less precise and therefore may include a greater sense of the unknown. Whereas sight draws us out into the world, hearing lets the world come in.

Oliver Sacks suggests in *Musicophilia* that we are a musical species as well as a linguistic one and our love of music is our sense of aliveness because music 'feels almost like a living thing.' We feel this in our mind's sense of movement. People with dementia or partial paralysis due to brain damage can often find themselves dancing gracefully when some music that they know is played. Mark Johnson gives examples in *The Meaning in the Body* including a commentary on the song, *Something*, which George Harrison created for the Beatles. 'Something in the way she moves, attracts me like no other lover . . .' is written so that the pitch moves, the duration of each note moves, the girl moves and you feel moved. If you rearrange the notation slightly this effect is lost and it's difficult, if not impossible, to explain why this is so.

Music helps us to understand space and time. The harmonic combination of a chord evokes our sense of space as the melody does for our sense of time. Music also helps us to understand wholeness and emergent properties because it is not the individual tones, it is their flowing combination that we appreciate and this is not a summation, of course, it is an entirely new creation whose properties could not be found in the separate components.

Perhaps there is a clue in this about the way that science and spirituality can flow together in our minds and hearts.