

EVERYDAY MIND AND LOVE 2018

Session 13 - September 20

This is the final session for the year – sadly, well short of the 20 sessions that I promised, due to circumstances beyond my control. Every end is a new beginning and I trust that, as we wrap up U3A lectures, each of us will find new things to do at this time that will be full of promise and satisfying meaning. One new beginning for me that you might be interested in is that, as the lecture notes on my website will not be continued, I will start putting up a weekly **Blog**, from today, which will cover the same subjects. It will be in smaller bites, but delivered more often – every Thursday. New books will be featured as they come out and the themes from this Course will be continued. I am very keen to keep on reading and writing about these matters, albeit in a more limited way. Those of you who have been looking at the regular U3A Notes may like to follow the Blog – and if you feel like commenting on anything, please send me an email. There have always been a few other people who don't attend the Course but do read the Notes, so I hope they might like the Blog too.

The first **Biosong Blog** makes reference to a book by Desmond Morris called *The Naked Ape* that came out in 1967. Does anyone remember that? The sub-title was *A Zoologist's Study of the Human Animal*. The human mind is very different from that of other animals, but it works on the same basic principles and **it can be helpful to know what these principles are**.

Morris was an ethologist as well as a zoologist (so he studied behaviour generally) and he wrote something that I think was very important at that time. He wrote: 'This unusual and highly successful species spends a great deal of its time examining its higher motives and an equal amount of time studiously ignoring its fundamental ones.' Biology did not figure much in the discourse on human physiology and psychology in those days. People did not really want to know there were fundamental biological processes that profoundly affected our mind – it was not all clever, rational thoughts. I was just getting into my research on the basic biology of stress and starting to think about how it applied to our minds.

By the end of the century, however, there was a whole new field called 'evolutionary psychology' and the 'biology of mind' had stamped its place in cognitive science – most emphatically, in my opinion, through the work of Maturana and Varela. We can now speak of biological mechanisms that equip our minds with an extraordinary **social and emotional intelligence**, far beyond its rational capabilities that are based on the idea that the brain is like a computer. Yet during the same period, the amount and complexity of our **Technology** has developed far more quickly than our understanding of the human mind and behaviour. It sometimes feels like it has taken over.

This year, a new book that mentions the Morris book has given us a powerfully optimistic overview of the present state of affairs for the human mind. It is called *The Digital Ape - How to Live (in Peace) with Smart Machines* by Sir Nigel Shadbolt and Roger Hampson. Just as the earlier book revealed threads of biology that had been overlooked until then, this new book spells out the stark reality of the way we live today, heavily engaged with artificial intelligence in everything we do and with our minds immersed in our interaction with technology. It charts a positive blueprint for a future in which, despite the many pains of

adaptation that we will suffer along the way, we will generally benefit from our technology, without completely losing our minds.

Previously in this Course I've spoken about some of the dangers and difficulties that our relationship with technology presents. I strongly recommend Mary Aiken's book *The Cyber Effect*. She is a forensic psychologist studying the way human behaviour changes in the online world. I found it quite alarming, particularly with regard to the lives of children. I've also mentioned the serious challenge to what I've called the 'magic of social engagement' that is researched by Sherry Turkle (*Alone Together, Reclaiming Conversation*) and others and the commendably cautionary books by Nicholas Carr (*The Glass Cage, The Shallows*). I've also said that this is not a time for fear or despair; rather we need to work hard to find the right relationship with technology.

A book I've mentioned briefly before: *The Most Human Human* is an entertaining read – by Brian Christian, subtitled *What Artificial Intelligence Teaches Us About Being Alive*. It's about a competition to make a computer that could not be distinguished from a human by a team of judges who interrogated it from another room. You might remember this was Turing's famous 'test.' The fact is, it has now become impossible to detect the computer that is pretending to be a human if you can't actually see what it looks like. Therefore we will be working hand in hand with machines in a thousand more ways, often without actually realising it. These machines have already become our trusted 'companions.' Try separating young people from their phones! Machines will replace humans in more and more jobs. This has been happening throughout history, but never before at this rate, so the disruption will create many problems. We will suffer many pains of adaptation from changing work and social interaction that will include new ways of hurting one another and different forms of suffering that will have to be addressed. But they will be addressed because of the incredibly resilient nature of the human mind. There is no reason to believe we will be destroyed by our technology *per se*.

That's the perspective of the *Digital Ape* authors anyway. The ways in which humans may eventually self-destruct remain the same – nuclear warfare and climate change (which we only know about through big data analysis). There are significant new threats from high-tech warfare (managed by button-pressing) and the trend towards the unequal concentration of power in the hands of small groups that has always been an issue is worsening. On the positive side, they describe the potential for 'augmenting' everything from health monitoring and medical treatments to transport and communication, prediction and planning and lifestyle generally. They end the book with a plea for augmenting our wisdom at the same time.

This means **using our minds** in the best possible way. Our minds will operate by themselves, but we are more likely to make wise decisions if we take responsibility for the way we use our mind. I said earlier today **it can be helpful to know what the underlying biological principles are**. I wonder: How does this strike you now that we come to the end of our Course? To me it means that my mind gets far too complicated if left entirely to its own devices. The biology is the '**bottom line**' at any point in time – the simplest position to take. If I'm confused and unhappy with what is happening in my mind, I find it helpful to go to the bottom line.

There are various meditation tools for going within to find the simplest state of consciousness that lies beneath our thinking mind. Michael Singer's *The Untethered Soul* is a good example

as are any of the workshops available online from Eckart Tolle and many other wise teachers – hundreds of them, the list could go on and on.

I've been more concerned with **Everyday Mind**, being the routine use of our mind as we go about our daily business. It boils down to achieving autonomy and connectedness. I try to reduce all the machinations down to that. If things look bad I can say: Am I Me? That's the first thing. I am functional in various ways – I can move, I can communicate, etc. Then, how are my connections? That's the other thing. Not what are people doing to me, but what can I do to strengthen all my relationships. At this point the synergy between being and belonging only shines through when the **love** that is there in one's soul is brought to the surface and put into action. **Without love, being and belonging will always be difficult, but with love they strengthen one another.** You might note that this doesn't consist of working out how to control future circumstances, not even making judgments about other people (unless there is an obvious threat), and it involves your subconscious mind even more than your thoughts.

When I re-read the final Chapter of *Dancing with the Unknown*, which is called *The Feeling of Meaning*, some two years after it was originally written, I do not rush to change any of the points of summing-up that are in it. Each of them applies to this year's Course just as much as they did then, even though we've looked at several newer books in 2018. I'm not going to re-write them here, but I will highlight some that I think are very important.

Firstly, there is the point that we will each understand our own mind in different ways. This understanding is what I call **meaning** and each of us has to make our own. We can also enjoy some **shared meaning** wherever our different versions overlap. It follows that we will **explain** our minds in many different ways. I have no difficulty accepting the most unusual or colourful explanations of mind because I believe I can only know my own experience so I have no right to judge anyone else's. I do not have to embrace or adopt the explanations of others. Someone with an entirely different perspective may make an unexpected connection with me as Chris Johnson did in his book *It's About You* which is based on the teachings of *Seth*, an imaginary being who dictated many books of knowledge through a 'medium' who had the capability to hear what he was saying. That is only one of a vast number of texts and belief systems that are wholly or partly 'channelled' from somewhere unknown.

Many of them, including *Seth*, have a lot to say about love. The book *A Return to Love* by Marianne Williamson is a set of reflections on the principles outlined in *A Course in Miracles*, which is a very wise book with explicitly Christian references explaining how love comes from God. The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh interprets sacred 'Heart Sutras' into the contemporary language of love. I also like John Makransky's book *Awakening Through Love*.

There are thousands of recorded accounts of Near-Death-Experiences. In recent times Dr Eben Alexander's *Proof of Heaven* has attracted much attention, but also encountered much criticism because of inconsistencies in his personal accounts. A thoroughly impersonal discussion of *What Happens When We Die* (that does not give any real answers either) is by the philosopher Evan Thompson in the book *Waking, Dreaming, Being*. A personal life story that I found absolutely enchanting to read is *Into the Magic Shop* by Dr James Doty.

The school of psychology that I can relate to most closely is that associated with Viktor Frankl who focussed on **the way we make meaning**. Frankl was born in Vienna in 1905 into

a Jewish family and, as a young man, he specialised in preventing youth suicide and later in treating suicidal women (with considerable success in both cases). Then, he was the only member of his family to survive internment in the various Nazi concentration camps of World War II. After returning to professional life he wrote *From Death Camp to Existentialism*, which eventually became the well-known book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. His experience of being able to make meaning in circumstances that were extremely traumatic provoked him to write much about the 'soul' and the ultimate meaning that inevitably includes the unknown.

Alex Pattakos gives an interpretation of Frankl's thinking in his book *Prisoners of Our Thoughts*. He distilled **seven core principles** that he said can 'lead us to meaning, to freedom and to deep connection, to our own lives and to the lives of others . . .' Here is a brief summary of those principles.

1. Exercise the freedom to choose your attitude

Our attitudes are habitual and we come to believe that these habits are too entrenched to change; like everything else, they just happen. This channels our will to meaning in the direction of complaining, which further disempowers us. What Frankl called 'the last of the human freedoms,' the one that no one else or nothing else can take away, is the ability we have to choose our attitude to any situation at any time.

This is an authentic form of optimism. When we choose an attitude we are not judging the situation; we are simply looking for a positive starting point for the creative use of our imagination and expressing our desire for something different. An attitude is a way of looking at the possibilities without knowing the outcome.

2. Realise your will to meaning

Frankl's point is that it's our will to meaning, not our will to pleasure or our will to power, that provides us with true freedom. He said that mankind's main concern is forming and fulfilling meaning and actualising values rather than the mere gratification of drives and instincts. We don't find meaning because we achieved pleasure or power; we need to find the meaning first.

3. Detect the meaning of life's moments

The more preoccupied we are with what happened in the past or might happen in the future the less our mind is able to connect advantageously and the less chance we have of strong feelings of meaning. This is what I called confidence in the present moment.

Frankl says the 'seed of meaning' is always there, but it's hard to see if you are not attending to the present moment. Also, you need the emotional state of love to see clearly. Frankl wrote that 'love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire.' He saw it as I do as the mind's most useful attribute, therefore the source of most of the meaning.

4. Don't work against yourself

Trying too hard can be a serious impediment to progress because it distorts the meaning-making process. This has to do with expectation - you pre-empt the meaning that exists in that moment replacing it with what you think or hope is going to happen. You also tend to rely more and more on yourself alone instead of getting assistance. Self-will, without the

humility that comes with respect for the unknown, works against you rather than in your favour.

Frankl calls this ‘hyper-intention’ and he had an antidote for it that he named ‘paradoxical intention.’ When your good intention has become the problem and you are working against yourself you need to try the opposite intention for a while in order to free up your mind. Trying to do the opposite lightens your anxiety. For example, by getting patients to stutter more than they already were, to increase the sweating in their already-wet palms or to scribble nonsense on the page that was to be their greatest literary work, Frankl cured people of stuttering, having sweaty palms and being stuck with a ‘writer’s block.’

5. Look at yourself from a distance

Often we can’t see the broader context because we are too close to the immediate personal issues, taking them and ourselves too seriously. Here it is important to distinguish between self-detachment and denial. When we detach we do so consciously and without pretending that the issue isn’t there. We aren’t trying to run away, but simply standing back to get a better view. We are drawing on the special ability of the right side of our brain to do this.

6. Shift your focus of attention

This is especially useful if it is a shift away from complaining, which is focussing on the problem, toward trying something different, which is using your imagination. What Frankl called ‘de-reflection’ has the effect of leading you away from self-absorption and undue absorption in the problem itself, both of which are obstacles to finding creative solutions.

At a meeting in San Francisco many years ago I heard a man say that we all have problems, but few people realise that the solution will be (1) simpler than you expect, (2) of a spiritual nature (that is, transcending the situation), and (3) actually have very little to do with the problem. We don’t solve problems with the same level of thinking that created them (to paraphrase Einstein’s famous quote).

7. Extend beyond yourself

The ability to focus on and relate to something other than ourselves is crucial. Frankl wrote about an ‘ultimate meaning,’ which is a paradox because he also emphasised the unattainable nature of this kind of meaning. Unlike purpose, meaning is not a destination to be reached; in fact it doesn’t ever stand still for us to say we’ve finally got it so it always has an unfinished and indefinable aspect to it.

This last principle is behind the fact that many of us spend time in prayer or contemplation to enhance our feeling of connection with something other than ourselves.

An 87-year-old psychotherapist whom I regard as very wise is Irvin Yalom. Just one of his many books that I am quoting from today is *Love’s Executioner and other Tales of Psychotherapy*. He writes: ‘The search for meaning, much like the search for pleasure, must be conducted obliquely. Meaning ensues from meaningful activity. It is a by-product of engagement and commitment.’ He says we need to tolerate uncertainty to do this, that the strength of our human spirit lies in ‘meaningful uncertainty.’

Finally, George Vaillant was a supervising psychiatrist for the famous Harvard Study of Human Development that followed men throughout their entire lives to see how they

responded to every kind of problem they encountered. In the book *Spiritual Evolution - How We Are Wired for Faith, Hope and Love*, he says that negative emotions are important at the time they happen, but in the long run it is the positive emotions from which we gain the meaning that we need. He calls this an **attitude** of ‘spirituality’ (from the Latin for breath) which, like breathing, simply means ‘participating in life.’

I thank U3A for making it possible for me to put on these Courses for many years and I thank each of you for travelling this journey with me. The time is right to end now, remembering that EVERY END IS A NEW BEGINNING.

Every end is a new beginning
Every failure is something learned
Every loss was a chance at winning
Unrequited means truly yearned

Every tumble leads to rising
Every hurt is the need to heal
Every grief yields sympathising
Every pain shows that you feel

Difficulties are debentures
Problems are a challenge really
Even mishaps are adventures
Setbacks show the path more clearly

Every wrong is a cause worth righting
Each mistake is a chance success
Every miss improves the sighting
And every more is also less