A Personal Journey: A Nonrational Approach

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Abstract: Who am I? What is life's purpose?

As the maturing process in human beings implies change, the answers to these questions will also change as one comes to know himself better. Therefore, it is not my intention to give definite answers to these questions as I feel it to be impossible. However, through my studies and research, I discovered the importance of the emotions in the struggle to find answers to the above-mentioned questions. It is to explain this importance that I have written my reflections and chosen to use a personal, reflective style rather than the more formal, technical one found in most papers.

Key words: journey, visionary, mystic, I-It relationship, I-You relationship.

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Introduction

Who am I? What is life's purpose?

In this paper I would like to invite the readers to share with me the impressions and struggles I experienced with these two questions while studying two paintings, one by the surrealist Yves Tanguy and the other by the visionary William Blake, and reading three books, *The Journey to the East* by Herman Hesse, *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel and *I and Thou* by Martin Buber.

Otto A. Bird in his article *Humanities* (Encyclopedia Britannica, 15th ed., 1974) states, "Education in the humanities is nonvocational, nonprofessional, aiming at the maturation of the person as man and citizen, not as a worker in some specialized field; and, for that reason, humanistic education is concerned with the arts and skills that find their expression in the great objects, problems and values of human interest." (p. 1182)

For one to mature as a person and a citizen, a constant endeavour to find answers to the above two questions is all important. It is my hope that the reader after finishing this paper, will have a deeper appreciation of the importance of the humanities both as a field of study and a help in his daily life, and through his private reading of works of literature or contemplation of famous paintings, try to come to a fuller knowledge of who he is and what his primary purpose in life is.

The Problem

To tell the truth, I find it quite difficult to write this paper. The impressions made on me by the paintings and books have been very great and even though my mind is filled with thoughts that are pushing and struggling with each other to appear in this paper, I hesitate to put my fingers to the keys of the typewriter. Why is this? Is it because I am trying to write a rational paper about a nonrational subject thus causing a conflict between my intellectual and emotional approach to the subject? Does my ordered mind rebel at the terms, surrealist, visionary and mystical?

I think I know the cause of this difficulty, but knowing the cause does not make it any easier for me to put my thoughts down on these pages.

The answer lies, I think, in the fact that it was "I" who read the books and looked at the paintings and who is now trying to express my thoughts. I have read books similar to the ones mentioned above and glanced at many paintings by famous artists, but have never had the feelings I experienced while looking for answers in the above three books and two paintings to the two questions that appeared at the beginning of this paper. At times, my contacts with works of literature and art are, to use the words of Martin Buber, "I-It" relationships. In preparation for this paper, the two questions forced me to enter into "I-You" relationships with the authors and artists and I found that it was not as easy as one would imagine. The paradox lies in the fact that although I have always thought I was interested in discovering my true self and my purpose for living, when I started to look at myself with the help of the books and paintings, using my emotions rather than just my mind's eye, I noticed the struggle beginning within me.

Therefore, with the above thoughts in mind, I would now like to unfold before the readers' eyes that part of my life's journey when I studied and thought about the contents of the books and paintings mentioned in my introduction.

The Paintings

Let us begin by first looking at the world we are living in and the dangers it holds for us. In order to see these dangers, Tanguy's painting, "Ma Vie Blanche et Noire" and Blake's "The Gate of Hell" are very helpful. We can see not only man's struggle on his way through life but also the pitfalls awaiting the unwary as he journeys through life.

In Yves Tanguy painting, I saw a struggling world trying to reach its goal, or its God. However, the mass of people was struggling towards and reaching out to a technological or manmade god with the result that rather than a paradise, a scene from hell, of death and destruction, is depicted.

While looking at William Blake's painting, the following questions came to mind.

Why is the gate so large? Why are the two people in a position that depicts an expectancy of starting out on a new adventure? Why is there the contrast of foliage and desolation? The following answers came to me as I sat looking at the painting. The gateway is large and therefore easy to enter. It is so large in fact, I may pass through it without even noticing. The foliage and the two young people reminded me of Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden. However, the attitude of Adam and Eve in a picture I recalled from my childhood and that of the two people in this painting were much different. The picture I recalled from my childhood showed Adam and Eve in an attitude of humility whereas the two young people in Blake's painting seem to be hopefully looking forward to their adventure after they have passed through the gate.

After following this rational method of reasoning, I then tried, as I had done while looking at Tanguy's painting, to let my emotions take over completely. Whether I was successful in this or not I am not sure but the conclusions I came to after looking at the two pictures were about the same. I saw the world in both pictures. In this world we can, by absorbing ourselves completely in worldly pursuits, create our own hell.

The Books

If we now turn to the books, *The Journey to the East*, *Zen in the Art of Archery* and *I and Thou*, we see that the authors are presenting to us their methods of discovering who one really is and what his purpose is for living here in this world.

Herman Hesse takes us on an imaginary journey through which he shows us his struggles with himself, and by inference, the struggles of all men in their efforts to know themselves and reach a higher plain of union with the Spirit.

We see him starting off on his trip full of happiness and high expectations. As he goes from one place to another he receives spiritual helps, warnings, and moments of deep spiritual consolations. However, with the departure of Leo from the group, doubts begin to form in the minds of the members and their breaking up into small groups forces a discontinuation of the journey.

The narrator, with the feeling that he is still faithful to the League, goes back to his former environment. There he convinces himself that he will be faithful to the League if he writes its history. He searches out a former friend in the hope that he will be able to help him in his writing of the book. Although his friend is kind and gives him as much help as he is able to give, in effect, he tells him that if he wants to be successful, he has to forget his journey, the League and Leo.

Through the chance glimpse of Leo one day, we see the narrator being given a grace or help to start on his journey to membership in the League again. Through his search for Leo and gradual desolation of spirit, he finally breaks down in an agony of repentance.

At his trial he is made to see that his pride and lack of faith have kept him from seeing that it is himself that is the main obstacle to his return to the League. Finally, before the assembled members of the League, he confesses and comes to see himself as he really is. Through the penance imposed upon him, he sees the purpose of his life, that is, that Leo must grow and he must disappear. With this realization he reaches a higher plain of consciousness and advances greatly along the road to perfection.

In the book *Zen in the Art of Archery*, we again see a man trying to discover who he is and his purpose for living. In order to find answers to these questions, he enters along the mystical path of Zen through the art of archery.

This book shows us the struggles the author went through in his gradual advancement to the stage where, he, the bow, the arrow and the target became one. We see him struggling to keep his independence and progress in his own way. However, through the patient guidance of the Master, he finally reaches the stage where he realizes that he is just beginning.

Martin Buber in his book *I and Thou* also dwells on the same theme. He shows us that the real values in this world come when we enter into relationships that are devoid of one's own desires, that is, "I-You" relationships. This type of relationship helps us to know ourselves better through our selfless relationships with others. On the other hand, an "I-It" relationship has its basis in selfishness and puts emphasis on what one can receive from a relationship. Buber concludes his thesis by saying that the ultimate "I-You" relationship is the eternal "I-You" relationship, which is union with God.

A Personal Application

In the application of the themes of these books to my own life, I found that *The Journey to the East* was my map, *I and Thou* my conscience and *Zen in the Art of Archery* my ideal. After writing the above sentence, I realize that this is not the best way of explaining it as they were all inter-related and left me with the following ideas.

I have spent many hours in thought and meditation and have started out on journeys like the one described by Hesse, "The eternal strivings of the human spirit towards the East, towards Home." (p. 13) I have also had the same feelings that Herrigel experienced, "I had realized, therefore that there is and can be no other way to mysticism than the way of personal experience and sufferings, and that, if this premise is lacking, all talk about it is so much chatter." (p. 15)

I have started out on my journeys with complete honesty and determination, as mentioned on page 11 of *The Journey to the East*, or as Herrigel says, "I felt ready to go to any length if only there were some hope of my getting a bit nearer to Zen." (p. 17)

I believe I have been purified and made to see myself a little better as were Hesse's narrator when he received spiritual help from "the power of the guardians of the crown,"

(p. 16) and Herrigel when he tried to develop the right breathing technique (p. 22) and during the drawing, holding and loosing of the arrow. (p. 37)

The frustration and despair experienced by the narrator in *The Journey to the East* during his search for Leo, and that of Herrigel in his struggle to reach the day when the Master would say, "You have now reached a stage where teacher and pupil are no longer two persons, but one" (p. 73) have also been part of my experiences.

I also have to admit that there have been times in my life when pride and my other faults have blinded me to seeing myself as I really am, as in the case of the narrator in Hesse's book, and when my relationships with others have been only "I-It" relationships. My pride in wanting to do things my way and convincing myself that it is the only way, is much the same as Herrigel's explanation of his reasoning on pages 55 and following.

The contemplation of the ideas expressed in these books has made me sit back and look at myself. Much of the subject matter I have studied or read before, but in these books I have had it presented to me again in a nonrational style. I have found that reading books written in this style, although they may be much more difficult to comprehend than an ordinary textbook, do force one to continually compare himself and his actions with what the author has written. I found this especially true while reading *The Journey to the East* and *I and Thou*. During my reading of *Zen in the Art of Archery*, for the most part, I could not escape the feeling of being a spectator, watching someone else attain his goal. It was like listening to a teacher telling me the secrets of Zen: the end is the beginning, happiness should not come with success, the person and his actions are one and so on.

The Discovery

After finishing these books, do I now have clearer answers to my two original questions? The contents of these three books reinforced many of the moral teachings I learned in my childhood, such as, my relationship with others should be unselfish and I should be strong enough to persevere in what I decide to do and humble enough to say I am sorry when I have made a mistake. The readings also made clear to me that my journey through life will be at times one step forward and two steps back. However, rather than finding clearer answers to my two questions, I believe I discovered a way to help me find these answers. This way is to allow my emotions to become more active when reading a book or looking at a painting. It was a joy to sit back after reading sections of the different books and in my own little world have a conversation with myself. The journey to the East became my journey along the road to perfection and I found myself asking different questions as I thought about various passages in Hesse's book. Also, I could relate to Herrigel's struggles with himself to rid himself of self, and admired how he succeeded, whereas I am still far down the path.

Finally, the most difficult part for me, while reading these books, was to determine the meaning of the authors' answers to my second question, or their explanation of the goal of life, and then try to apply these goals to my own life.

In *Zen in the Art of Archery* we have the following lines,

All is emptiness: your own self, the flashing sword, and the arms that wield it. Even the thought of emptiness is no longer there. From this absolute emptiness...., comes the most wondrous unfoldment of doing. (p. 85)

In *The Journey to the East* we have the words,

I perceived that my image was in the process of adding to and flowing into Leo's, nourishing and strengthening it. It seemed that, in time, all the substance from one image would flow into the other and only one would remain: Leo. He must grow, I must disappear. (p. 123)

In *I and Thou*, Martin Buber states,

But now the contradiction appears, appealing to the familiar content of the concept of a person. A person, it says is by definition an independent individual and yet also related by the plurality of other independent individuals; and this of course cannot be said of God. This contradiction is met by the paradoxical designation of God as the absolute person, that is one that cannot be relativized. It is as the absolute person that God enters into the direct relationship with us. The contradiction must give way to this higher light. (pp. 181-182)

Martin Buber goes on to say that the man who turns towards God need not turn his back on any other "I-You" relationship. He says, "Quite legitimately he brings them all to God and allows them to become transfigured in the countenance of God." (p. 182)

The applying of these goals to my life is the most interesting and at the same time the most frustrating. The goals seem to be just out of reach. While thinking of them I get the same feeling as when I try to contemplate the meaning of eternity or to visualize space. The paradox of developing my talents to the fullest but in the process becoming nothing in my own sight, stands as a challenge to my whole being.

A Tentative Conclusion

Who am I? What is life's purpose? Where and how do I find the answers to these questions? Is the place that spot which the eyes of the statue of Moses, by Michelangelo, are looking at? Is it the space that begins at the tip of a branch in a Zen painting? Do I have the courage to make a journey out into that space? Have I experienced such a journey? In deciding on the answer to this last question, I will also find the answer to the one preceeding it.

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わが詩想の旅

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- 要 旨:** 自己とは何か？ 人生の目的とは何か？ 人間の成長過程は変化に富むものであるから、こうした問いに対する解答は、人が自己をよりよく発見してゆくにつれて変化してゆくものである。
- 従って、上記の問いに対して、一定の解答を与えるという事は、本稿の意図するところではない。しかしながら、自分の研究を通して、私はこれらの問いに対する解答を捜し求めながら、感情の重要性を発見するに至った。そこで、この重要性を説明する為に、私は自分の詩想をまとめ、記述方法も一般の論文に見られるような学術的形式的スタイルではなく、個人的な自己表現的スタイルを用いることにした。

J. UOEH (産業医大誌), 2 (3): 431-437 (1980)