

Spiritual Narratives on Equality

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ABSTRACT *Personal therapy has not made the world a more equal place as many of us hoped it would in the 20th century. I argue here that we also need a spiritual narrative. Equality in many forms has been central to the aims of most radical progressive social movements. The intention is often also to be non-hierarchical in their organization, thinking and lifestyles. However, few have succeeded for long. Many psychotherapists such as Wilhelm Reich have studied this problem and suggested solutions such as dismantling psychological defences and living from the core of ourselves. But people often mistook the idea of 'core' as merely acting from our impulses, leading, for example, to the shadow sides of '60s 'freedoms'. Perhaps the deepest core is actually where we attune to what Engels called the spirit in nature. Today the spiritual dimension is returning into the world of psychotherapy and politics from the surprising source of postmodernism. But exactly what kind of spirituality might be emerging to co-create with the new equality politics in shaping the 21st century? In this article inspired by the ideas of postmodernists such as Julia Kristeva and mystics such as Lao Tzu, I outline some ideas that may be important. One of these is the concept of 'jouissance', which is an embodied ecstatic joy. Fluidity, flow, rhythm, dance, nomadic wandering, alternation and eternal return may also be features of the new spirituality. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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INTRODUCTION

Most radical, progressive social movements, from the communes of the '60s to the Arab revolutions of 2011, intend to be non-hierarchical. There is an increasing desire to not have obvious leaders in the old style. Even political parties are often discouraged on to the streets during protests such as those by students in 2010 in the UK, and in 2011 in Greece and Spain. Millions of us are trying to build a new, more egalitarian culture amid the ruins of the old. It is about equality from below, from inside, rather than imposed only from above. It brings freedom and equality together rather than setting them one against the other. Young people especially are tired of the old top down systems with their hypocrisy and corruption as well as of the crass materialism of today's world. Deep changes seem to be coming.

'Today time is split between a present that is already dead and a future that is already living, and the yawning abyss between them is becoming enormous' (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 358).

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One of the main features of the new is its emphasis on non-hierarchical relating. Nick Totton writes: 'Can we humans build a culture which lives up to and expresses the complexity of the world we inhabit? Such a culture would have to give up hierarchy and control as its structure and goal' (Totton, 2011, 210).

People in these movements usually start passionate about equality but then all too often revert to subtle and not so subtle hierarchies of gender, class, personality etc. In the 1970s there was a popular pamphlet circulating around progressives, called 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' (Freeman, 1975 [1970]). It pointed out how often the more confident personalities began to dominate, even in groups trying hard not to have leaders and to respect everyone's voice. Of course equality does not mean sameness, and different individuals have different skills and experience etc. But this isn't only about rational, conscious co-operation. There are of course many complex reasons for this reversion to old hierarchies, but as a psychotherapist I am especially interested in the unconscious and cognitive factors involved. Several therapists coming from a left wing background have looked at these issues in terms of inner hierarchical structures and our fear of freedom. These include Wilhelm Reich (1970) and Erich Fromm (1978), who were both popular in the '60s and '70s but are less so now. Murray Bookchin wrote of May '68:

It challenged not only the conscious processes of individuals but also their most important socially conditioned habits. . . . These habits of authority and hierarchy are installed in the individual at the very inset of life. (Bookchin, 1977, 259)

UNCONSCIOUS PARADIGM SHIFTING

But where are we today, more than forty years on? On a conscious level so much has changed. Women are treated on the surface as more equal etc. But 5000 years of the hierarchic paradigm is unlikely to transform overnight or even in one little century.

In my practice today I still notice how very deeply the unconscious inequalities are buried. There are the needs and fears of the inner child often so dependent on parental authority even while rebelling against it. There are the old mind sets of 'superior' and 'inferior' that we are taught so early in life. These paradigms sink right into the unconscious and become like the very air we breathe, taken for granted and unquestioned.

While in many ways, more and more people all over the world believe in the ideals of equality, whether it's between countries and cultures or individuals, economic inequality has actually increased over the past few decades. One reason for this has been the rise and rise of corporate capitalism and its attitude that the market is God. Bankers can be seen as the priests, and consumers the awestruck worshippers. Its narrative of maximizing profit and the paradigm of forever climbing upward with endless aspiration has sunk into everyone's unconscious minds. But as most of us now realize, the market is an amoral, cold and inhuman God. It forces us all to be permanently dissatisfied, and wanting more and more, long after our reasonable needs are met. This is not psychologically healthy for human beings, as Fromm (1978) points out. But what can replace it?

IS THE MULTITUDE ENOUGH?

For many progressives there is hope that the ‘multitude’, like an orchestra without a conductor, will ‘naturally’ create what is needed in the moment. ‘Constant communication determines its own beat’, say Hardt and Negri (2005, 353). This has indeed happened in Egypt in Tahrir Square, for example. The protesters had no formal leadership, were in constant communication with each other and followed the needs of the moment with intuition and integrity. It was a perfect example of Hardt and Negri’s multitude. There were many different groups involved, but enough was shared to create another culture during the protest. For Hardt and Negri (2005, 353) that ‘another world is possible means . . . authority must be destroyed. But there is not a subordination or unification of differences’.

The idea of ‘groundless solidarity’ (Levin, 1989) has also been important. In the new anti-global capitalism movements since Seattle in 1999 very diverse groups come together without merging. They share the ground of ‘another world is possible’ but disagree and debate passionately. On the street there is solidarity around injustice and inequality. But is that enough?

This approach can seem somewhat idealistic while individuals still have such deeply ingrained unconscious hierarchies, as well as having to deal with state oppression and market needs. How can this change? Some would have talked of therapy for everyone. Yet 100 years of more and more personal therapy doesn’t seem to have changed individuals or societies in a more progressive, egalitarian direction, even in the ‘liberal’ West. Hillman and Ventura (1992) wrote about this in *We’ve Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World Is Getting Worse*.

Perhaps if everyone in the multitude was fully connected to their deepest core selves then the orchestra would create its symphony freely. If everyone was tuned into their deepest intuition and ‘obeyed’ no other authority than that, then the music would find its own appropriate form. If everyone had dissolved most of their layers of defences and social conditioning then the spirit could flow where it needs to go. But what is this spirit?

A NEW SPIRITUAL NARRATIVE

Herbert Read wrote in *The Philosophy of Anarchism* (Read, 1977, 74) that he didn’t think you could ‘build any enduring society without some mystical ethos’ – otherwise there is only ‘naive materialism’.

It is possible that out of the ruins of our capitalist civilization a new religion will emerge, just as Christianity emerged from the ruins of the Roman civilization. . . . Religion in its later stages may well become the opium of the people, but while it is vital it is the only force that holds people together. (Read, 1977, 74)

The paradigm shift away from hierarchy and endless growth may indeed need a new spiritual narrative. But what can it be? On the streets of the protest movements, the term ‘horizontal’ is increasingly used to contrast with the vertical structures of oppressive leadership. ‘Equilibrium’ is another term connected to ecology and the green movement. But both words are rather static images. Another narrative would be that everything is in process of balancing and equalizing from the very small to the very large. This flow could itself be seen as the spirit in nature. Frederick Engels (1934) called it the ‘dialectics of nature’ in the 19th century,

but I prefer to describe it as equalizing rhythm. Everything eventually turns into its opposite. It is similar to Taoism, the ancient Chinese philosophy that gave us Yin and Yang.

The Tao is something mysteriously formed, born between heaven and earth in the silence and the void. Standing alone and unchanging, ever present and in motion. Perhaps it is the mother of ten thousand things. I do not know its name. Call it Tao, for lack of a better word. I call it great. Being great it flows. It flows far away, having gone far it returns. (Feng and English, 1973, 25)

An honouring of this process combined with genuine respect of the other, whether human or non-human, can be a spiritual narrative and practice for the 21st century. The word 'spiritual'; is problematic for some people and other words might be more helpful. However, it does come from the Latin 'espris', which means 'breath'. We cannot see the breath but it is needed for life and it flows both in and out. Rumi (translated by Abdulla, 2000) writes of God's 'dancing breath'. Spirit can be thought of as an invisible world all around us that science hasn't yet fully understood. But it is real. And we don't need organized religion to relate to it. However, most religions do have their spiritual – even mystical – sides, as well as their often oppressive hierarchies. Many religions also have the sense that God loves all 'his' children equally. Some, like Taoism and Sufism, talk of the unseen flow that we can attune to when in a still and empty place within. 'Saints are like rivers. They flow where they are directed. . . . but the river does not know if it is flowing' (Bhai Sahib, quoted in Tweedie, 1979, 114). So these ideas are not new.

In the past many social revolutionaries have thought that the idea of trusting in anything unseen must be reactionary and likely to result in fundamentalism and tyranny. But what if we allowed ourselves to trust in a deeper equalizing process? What if we are being more truly revolutionary by trusting this equalizing flow rather than believing that everything has to be consciously controlled by us? Postmodernist philosophers like Julia Kristeva (1980) write of a fluidity that we can attune to, and embody rather than control. She coined the term 'dancing receptacle' to describe how this kind of narrative could actually be experienced and expressed. When we are in deeply 'enlightened' states of consciousness our actions do seem to flow wisely. And these moments are not only for the gurus or saints. We can all learn to empty our minds of hierarchical thought patterns, listen to our deepest intuition and see the other as equal. Of course this is not an easy or overnight process but from my work as a therapist I believe that at our core we already 'know' this place. Kristeva also writes of the importance of *jouissance* as a feature of postmodern spirituality. It is an embodied ecstasy deeper than just excitement.

Deleuze and Guattari (1988) write of a directionless, nomadic wandering that is similar to the Sufi's idea of flowing like a river when fully attuned. No one or nothing is in control as such. It also connects with ideas of Taoism and the mysterious force that flows between opposites, turning them into each other. What is high becomes low and what is low becomes high. But how do we live in this more fluid way in our everyday lives? Is it realistic and practical? Can a spirituality and psychology centred on equality and flow work for anyone?

PRACTICAL IDEAS FOR A NEW SPIRITUALITY

In my book *Deep Equality: Living in the Flow of Natural Rhythm* (Chaplin, 2008) I explore ways in which any of us can begin to live this new spiritual narrative. For example, the breath

is an everyday example of an equalizing rhythm. Our lives depend on it going in as well as out. We can't keep it in one direction for long. A simple technique is to keep remembering this breath as a permanent companion and as a reminder of the rhythm of life itself. Another is to keep the idea of equality in the forefront of our minds. When we really look at another being as equal we often enter into deeper states of consciousness naturally. But consciousness deepening by itself without an intention of dissolving hierarchies can be limited in terms of social change. After all, highly conscious societies in India for example have coexisted with massive hierarchies. In the 21st century it seems that we need new narratives that combine spiritual consciousness with equality. These might have the following features:

- (1) No worshipping of a being. Rather an honouring of the rhythmic equalizing processes of nature. Forms can be creative and played with, but never need to be rigid or permanent.
- (2) A recognition that everyone at their core is capable of being fully tuned in to the rhythms and needs of the moment, to the world of spirit.
- (3) In the end there is only the dance. Everything is moving, changing, balancing at many levels in many dimensions.
- (4) Spirit is within nature not separate or above it.
- (5) We are part of nature and everyone and everything is equal.
- (6) Each moment is equal to every other moment.
- (7) The breathing in and out of our breath is a metaphor for the rhythms of the cosmos, AND a practice to keep us connected. The 'in' is equal to the 'out'.
- (8) Ecstatic joy can be an everyday feature of life. And altruism can come from desire and pleasure, from the core of our naturally loving selves rather than mere duty.
- (9) It is a spirituality for common humanity while respecting non-hierarchical, nature attuned, mystical aspects of all religions and cultures.
- (10) It creates the interconnected, balancing mindset needed for sustainable living and post-peak oil economics.

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