

The overwhelming belief in the concept of Progress in much of modern western society makes any argument that life could have been better in the past seem not only contrary but heretical. The arguments for progress are based on the values found in public documents such as The Future We Want, the outcome document of the 2012 United Nations conference called Rio plus 20, signed by 193 member states. This document builds upon many other international conferences and documents largely linked to Sustainable Development and the Millenium Goals. The values are those of liberal western ideology and include material prosperity for all (an end to poverty), good health for all, equal rights for all (particularly with regard to women and non-whites) and environmental sustainability. On the basis of these values, the idea that non-modern societies with their hierarchical social structures, “unscientific” medicine, poor standards of living and lack of human rights could be better than the present seems ridiculous. Yet if one changes the criteria by which one assesses progress, then such analysis becomes less clear.

For example, if one is to consider the amount of love, beauty or wisdom within a society, what can be said about the present compared to the past? Why do we still enjoy the works of Shakespeare or Homer, or music such as composed by Bach or Mozart, or painting by people such as Rembrandt or Giotto (to name just some of those from the west European tradition) and see these works as telling us something profound about human beings and the world? Were the societies in which such works were created less meaningful than ours? Can we produce such writing or music or art today? What have we lost since then, which might be important, and have we gained something which is greater than our loss?

For this essay I want to leave most of these questions aside and just focus on the ideas of three people, Heidegger, Eckhart and Ibn ‘Arabi, in regard to what they feel is the main criterion for assessing whether a culture or person is good or less good. For these thinkers the ultimate and only criterion of judgement is the extent to which an individual or society is enabled to participate in Being, also understood as Reality or Truth. The idea that our most important values are based upon education, health, equality of opportunity, status, rights, or “wellbeing” would be incomprehensible for pre-modern thinkers such as Eckhart and Ibn ‘Arabi, and were rejected as gossip or trivia by Heidegger. For all these thinkers only Being ultimately gives meaning, and ways of life which discourage engagement with Being are ways of ignorance, delusion and failure. They are a failure of the human being to be fully human and to fulfil his or her real potential.

But what is this “Being” about which they talk? For all three thinkers it may be described as the foundational reality of all that exists, the only reality, from which all creation, thought, feeling and experience arises. It cannot be experienced as an object or an identifiable state, because it is prior to all division and objectification, prior to all language and feeling. It is an essence of oneness without Other from which multiplicity, time and consciousness arise and on which they forever depend.

Now Ibn ‘Arabi and Eckhart, along with other mystics and philosophers of the middle ages, have no difficulty in starting from a supposition of Being underlying and giving rise to creation, since they lived in a time when the unity and power of God was accepted by most people. Consequently, their thought in regard to the foundational reality of Being is much more developed and sophisticated than Heidegger’s who has started from the assumptions of modernity, and who has tried almost single-handedly to find a path back to Being through thinking from first principles. As such we can look to Ibn Arabi and Eckhart for a more complete and coherent philosophy based upon the unity of Being, whereas we can look to Heidegger for help in finding Being in our modern lives. In the first

instance I will focus on Ibn 'Arabi's work (rather than Eckhart's) being the more comprehensive of the two earlier thinkers in regard to Being.

Ibn 'Arabi's writings are extensive to say the least and include over 700 books of which 400 are still extant [Check], one of which, the *al-Futuh al-Makkiyya* has over 17,000 pages. His writings include philosophy, science, poetry, and prophecy amongst other subjects. He is not however a systematic writer and believed that his writing was inspired by God, and was not a product of his own rationality. Consequently, there are many challenging and contradictory elements in much of his writing. However, the themes and general understanding of God and creation, as well as Man's role in creation, are clearly articulated in many ways and contexts. In particular, his writings are the most comprehensive exposition of the philosophy of God's Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*) and how it relates to the multiplicity of experience in our lives and world.

At first it will seem to most people (especially modern people) that the idea of the unity of being as the only reality is nonsense. Obviously there are multiple things and experiences. This of course is true, but only at one level. We cannot actually grasp any created reality outside of time, and nothing remains the same even for a nano-second. We cannot stop time or stop change. As such the world is created and re-created new at every instant and nothing ever repeats itself. However, Ibn 'Arabi and other mystics and theologians claim that there is a reality beyond time and space which is unchanging and which is the basis of this created and ever changing world. We cannot say anything about this because it is beyond creation, but we can know that it is there. It is, in one sense, the only reality, because it is eternal (beyond time) and yet the source of time; it is unchanging and yet the source of all change. Without this eternal reality nothing would or could exist.

What then is the point of this creation? Why does the eternal reality require this creation in its less than real, changing and always temporary state? This is the key question at the root of all religions and philosophy. Ibn 'Arabi is clear about the answer and in support of his belief is fond of quoting the Hadith "I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known. So I created the creatures that I might be known". God's creation was God's self-revelation both in the sense of God seeing his Being in and through creation, and of expressing his Being to his creation. As such all creation is a manifestation of God's Being translated from unity to multiplicity, from eternity to time, from the ineffable to the material. This Being is not an entity, but becomes manifested in entities which in their relationship to each other express the infinity of God in his different aspects, which in Muslim thought are expressed by the names of God.

As such therefore God is imminent in creation and also transcendent, beyond creation. These are called God's similarity and his incomparability. For Ibn 'Arabi, in order to find God in his truth and reality we must therefore understand God in both aspects. Both are necessary and both tell us something very different. In his incomparability God is unknowable and the only response possible is one of awe and submission. In his similarity God is knowable by the manifestation of his attributes in creation, and there are many responses possible, but primarily the response should be one of love and adoration. To understand these two aspects is what Ibn 'Arabi calls "seeing with both eyes". Those who only see with one eye are either idolators (in that they associate God with others and do not preserve the unknowability of God) or rationalists (those who deny God the possibility of manifestation in creation, which rationality in itself is a form of dualism and unbelief).

"He who affirms the duality [of God and the world] falls in the error of associating something with God; and he who affirms the singularity of God [excluding from his reality everything which manifests itself in multiplicity] commits the fault of confining Him to a [rational] unity. Be careful of comparison when thou dost envisage duality; and be careful not to separate the divinity when thou dost envisage Unity. Thou art not Him; and yet thou art Him; thou wilt see Him in the essence of things, sovereign and conditioned at the same time" (from *Fusus Al-Hikam* in the word of Noah)

This “seeing with both eyes” also applies to the reality of what we see. Since all creation is both a manifestation of God’s Being (in time and space), but also is not God’s essential Being (which is beyond creation) everything both is and is not at the same time, or, to put it in another way, is He/ not He. Creation is both irreducibly paradoxical and also stands as a barzakh or isthmus between being and not being, between the paradoxical states of reality. As such we live in an “imaginal” world – we live in our own and in God’s imagination, and we can only understand this through imagination – not the imagination of fantasy, but of profound and felt spirituality and faith, connecting us to essential reality, not taking us away from it.<sup>1</sup>

How does one open one’s heart and mind to this imaginal world, to the reality of He/not He? For Ibn ‘Arabi, as for Meister Eckhart and other mystics, this opening or unveiling comes primarily and initially through self-emptying, through becoming nothing so that God can become everything, through being a “sheer servant” and utterly poor before God. “When the aspiring traveller clings to retreat and the remembrance of God’s name, when he empties his heart of reflective thoughts, and when he sits in poverty at the door of his Lord with nothing, then God will bestow upon him and give him something of knowledge of Him, the divine mysteries, and the lordly sciences” (Futuhat I 34.4)

Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings have many accounts of his mystical experiences and he believed that he had been given “the Seal of Mohammadan Friendship”, being the last person to encompass “the totality of prophetic works, states and knowledge... that had been realised only by Mohammad among all the prophets” (Chittick; Ibn ‘Arabi Heir to the Prophets, p16). This is quite a claim, and yet for Ibn ‘Arabi it is not a claim to high status but to servanthood. It was borne out by his innumerable encounters with God, including a “night journey” in the imaginal world, similar to that of Prophet Mohammed, which Ibn ‘Arabi describes in the following terms:

“In this night journey I gained the meanings of all the divine names. I saw that they all go back to a single Named Object and a Single Entity. That Named Object was what I was witnessing and that Entity was my own existence. So my journey had been only in myself. I provided no indications of any but myself. It was from here that I came to know that I am a sheer servant and that there is nothing whatsoever of lordship within me.” (F III 350.30 as quoted in Chittick p25).

In this and in many other revelations Ibn Arabi “encompassed Being in knowledge – nothing is in my heart but God” (F I 10.26). Consequently “everything we have mentioned.....in all our speech is only the differentiation of the all-inclusive reality, which was contained in seeing the One Reality” (F II 548.14). Ibn Arabi’s knowledge as the Seal of Mohammadan Friendship was not purely an apophatic knowledge of the unknowable essence, but was knowledge of the whole, of He/ not He, of God’s immanence as well as his transcendence. However, it is important to understand that the knowledge of God as unmanifest Being precedes the knowledge of God manifested. We need to start with the apophatic understanding, or at least we need to come to this fully before we can return to the understanding and adoration of God manifest in and through creation. This is both because we have to first become empty and nothing, in order for God to show himself fully and thus as the only One, without other (our nothingness corresponding to and requiring God’s undifferentiated all-ness and unity), and also because God as unmanifest Being, precedes and exceeds all manifestation (and as such is the origin and root of all creation, without which creation cannot be comprehended). This is therefore both an epistemological and an ontological priority, which is found also in most true mystical theologians as well as in Heidegger.

Ibn ‘Arabi believed that he had been given knowledge directly by God and his task is to convey this to others. He is not interested in knowledge which does not lead to God. He writes of his great work the al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya, that “this book is not a place for that which is given by the proofs of the

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<sup>1</sup> This is somewhat similar to the use of the term “imagination” by the Romantic poets and philosophers, but is a capacity of our hearts as infused by God, and not an effort of our individual minds or an inspiration of nature.

reflective powers, only for that which is given by the divine unveiling". "My heart clings to the door of the Divine Presence, waiting mindfully for what comes when the door is opened. My heart is poor and needy, empty of every knowledge.... When something appears to the heart from behind that curtain, the heart hurries to obey and set it down in keeping with the commanded bounds". It is for this reason that Ibn Arabi is not and cannot be considered a systematic writer, philosopher or theologian, even though he frequently uses arguments from logic, language and scripture, but primarily a conveyor of God's truth to the world, what Ibn 'Arabi calls a friend (walaya) of God, and what in a different context we call a prophet. Ibn 'Arabi's whole message and endeavour was to open up people to the Truth of God, to God's Being in its transcendence and immanence. It is this direct relationship with God as Being that we must seek today.

But where and how can we seek it? We are lost in a world of relativism and reductionism, without even the concept of prophecy to help us. This is not to say that non-western cultures and faiths do not in some places still maintain their respect for prophecy and revelation, but as I think correctly argued by Charles Taylor in his magnum opus *A Secular Age*, the default position of modernity, which is increasingly affecting the whole world, is one of secularism and the liberal humanist value system (as set out in the first paragraph of this essay). This approach appears benign and open, but is in fact intensely hostile to traditional societies and beliefs, as well as to sophisticated alternative philosophies such as those of Ibn 'Arabi and Eckhart, as the "progressive" emphasis on measurement, technology, individual choice and free trade is destructive of any way of life which is not based upon positivist and reductionist assumptions. There are however critiques of this modern "liberal" approach, which are present in very different ways in works such as the Papal Encyclical *Laudato 'Si*, psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist's book *The Master and His Emissary*, and the works of philosopher John Gray, to name but three important strands of resistance. But perhaps the strongest and best critique has been that of Martin Heidegger in his thinking and writing after his "turning" in the mid-1930s and particularly in the 50s and 60s.

Heidegger's whole career was spent on trying to understand the issue of Being, which for him was ultimate truth, not as an intellectual concept but as reality. If we live outside of Being then we live a life of untruth, of trivia and we are not fully human. Heidegger's writings are notoriously difficult, and this is partly because he is trying to speak about something which necessarily lies beyond words and things, and partly because he increasingly comes to see that poetry and a language of mystery can open up Being in way that is impossible to rational thought. In this sense, just like Ibn 'Arabi and indeed Eckhart in his sermons, the form in which he writes and also the games he plays on words and their meanings, is part of a strategy of "disclosure" or as Ibn 'Arabi would say, "unveiling". Eckhart was one of Heidegger's early influences and this becomes more apparent as Heidegger delves deeper into Being, seeking not only to express but to disclose Being in some way to his readers and listeners. The similarity of intention with Eckhart and Ibn Arabi is remarkable, but the context in which Heidegger operates could not be more different.

Apart from the language games and purposeful confusion of Heidegger's writings (mentioned above), in what other ways did Heidegger believe that Being could be disclosed? Primarily Heidegger thought that we see truths most clearly when there is a breakdown of normality. This idea was strongly developed in his early works, particularly in *Being and Time*, but it remains throughout his later works, alongside the more general idea of "disruption". We will only glimpse Being when something disrupts our sense of the normal, when we see things as they really are and then when we see the reality behind what things are, the ground of things, which itself is not a thing but is Being itself.

Heidegger is trying to help us to give up the idea of Being as the presence of entities and allow Being to speak itself. Increasingly he believes that we must stop thinking systematically or indeed thinking at all and become entirely passive, become listeners not speakers or thinkers. "Thinking ...is of being

insofar as thinking, belonging to being, listens to being." "We are to do nothing but wait" he writes elsewhere on this subject (as quoted in Heidegger by John Richardson).

What mitigates against this waiting and revelation in the modern world is what Heidegger calls "technology", which should not be understood as bits of machinery or even systems, but the way of thinking that "enframes" our world, imposing its will upon creation as well as consciousness. Technology wants to bring everything to presence as an item for use in this ordering of the world, it demands that we reduce things to their basic functional units. It is this essence of technology (its enframing of the world, its particular way of presenting nature and man) that leads to the way natural science, particularly physics, has developed in the west, not the other way round (ie that technology develops out of science). The destiny of technology becomes our destiny. In this way everything becomes "a standing reserve" ready for use, including ultimately man himself (note the way we talk about people as users, customers, stakeholders etc). "This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself." But of course as Heidegger then points out (in italicised bold script in the original text): "***In truth however precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself ie his essence***". We fail to see behind this presence of nature and man as standing reserves to the foundational Being which liberates us from ourselves and from the control that technology exerts, a control which hides real Being. This is critical and could be fatal for humankind.

Ultimately however Heidegger doesn't believe that Being can be revealed by philosophy or thinking of any kind. In a famous passage from his posthumously printed Der Spiegel article (given as an interview in 1966) he said "Philosophy will be able to effect no immediate change in the state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all purely human reflection and endeavour. Only a god can save us. I see the only possibility of a saving in thinking and poeming that prepares a readiness for the appearance of a god...We cannot think them here, we can at best prepare the readiness to wait". But god for Heidegger is not the end we seek (in fact god could be another form of concealing if we only sought gods as entities), but a way in which Being can appear. A god or gods are necessary to reveal Being by breaking the hold of enframing technology and allowing us to see our world differently again. Only a god is strong enough to break into our closed world and minds and set us free.

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Before moving on to a consideration of ways in which Being could be disclosed in our modern world, I want to clarify why I care about this - why, for me, it seems to be an important issue for our world at this time.

Firstly, and most obviously, Being is important because it is the foundation of everything, of all reality, consciousness, truth and the incredible diversity and miracle of creation itself. Ultimately only Being can give meaning to our world and to each of us as individuals. While I do not deny that many people also find meaning in many other activities and relationships, and in many cases lead happy and fulfilled lives, for most people personally and for our societies generally, unless there is an underpinning truth and reality, unless we are grounded in this eternal and ineffable Being, we will ultimately be lost in falsehood, relativism and nihilism. It can only end badly if our lives and our world are not based upon the reality and truth which we are calling Being. The understanding,

acceptance and participation in Being is therefore THE most important aspect of any society or individual life.<sup>2</sup>

All other values, therefore, are secondary and all judgements of what is important in our lives and way of living should identify the disclosure and realisation of Being as the primary criterion for assessment. On this basis we can start to appreciate why different societies and different times can not only inspire our hearts and imaginations with their truthfulness and beauty, but can also still have lessons for us today. The values embodied in Sustainability manifestos such as equality, health, alleviation of poverty and so forth, must give way to this primary value and criterion, or risk being the cause of the loss of all virtues and all truth.

I accept that this is a very challenging proposition, but without opening up this fundamental question we will forever be trapped in the closed and nihilistic thinking of “technology” as Heidegger would have it, or in falsehood and self-deception as Ibn ‘Arabi and Eckhart would say. When we judge our selves and our way of life on the basis of ultimate truth, only then do we free ourselves from the tyranny of un-grounded ideas and temporary values which have no real basis in truth, but on the contrary can be a form of slavery. Moreover, only in encountering Being do we start to understand what real freedom means, what free will means.

This does not mean that current values are necessarily wrong. But we need to go further into our souls and into Being in order for us to be able to return to a balanced and true judgement of commonly accepted values. I believe that in going more deeply into our hearts and in searching out and waiting for Being in the depths of our own being, we will undoubtedly have a new vision of reality which will change for ever our priorities as well as opening our hearts and minds to new possibilities and relationships.

I say this because it has been my own experience through much reading and through learning from certain wise friends and teachers, but more importantly through my own personal experiences in deep prayer and meditation, in the trauma of tragic bereavement and in near death personal suffering, that such a truth and reality of Being exists. Without glimpses of these profound and life-changing experiences, it is hard for anyone to comprehend what I am talking about. But most people have indeed glimpsed something of such things in their lives, even if they have ignored the light coming from that open door, or misunderstood the message that has been given them.

It could be asked why I should care about others also experiencing Being. This question of why anyone cares about others is also fundamental. It cannot be answered except in very negative terms (such as fear, economic efficiency, selfishness etc) unless there is a reason to care which stems from some sense of belonging to each other. The realisation of Being as the only reality, which is at the root of all creation, gives not only a sense of belonging but of unity with all creation. There is only one creation just as there is only one human being. We care for our self in others and in nature because we are one with them. At the same time multiplicity and diversity in every aspect of creation are a manifestation of the infinite aspects and creativity of Being, leading us to value and care for difference and particularity because it is essential for our own understanding of ourselves as created and for Being as the source of creation. These cannot be only intellectual ideas, but must be felt, imagined, infused in our souls and carried in our bodies if they are to make sense and become part of our world view, our way of living, our consciousness.

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<sup>2</sup> As explained above in the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi, Being as transcendent essence and Being as manifested in creation are two aspects of one reality. However, in both cases Being is one and the same. Seeing with both eyes is necessary for a clear vision of this one reality, which cannot be logically inferred or objectified. It is beyond all rational speculation or materiality, though abstract reason and embodied physicality can be two pathways to its fuller disclosure.

So, to be clear, I do not care about others or society because of equality or some other ideological concept. Furthermore, I don't want to save humanity from social breakdown or the planet from climate change or from loss of natural biodiversity and species because of some human or natural use or function. I care primarily about such things as a spontaneous feeling of connection and kinship to all beings animate, inanimate, and imaginary, as manifestations of Being, the eternal reality of which I (and all people and creation) am a part. The general lack of understanding of Being is a concern for me because it is leading to more and more negativity, ugliness and destruction, which diminishes my own enjoyment and understanding of Being as well as causing me to sorrow for the unhappiness and suffering of creation and people with whom I am ultimately one.

However, even destruction and desecration may have meaning as a manifestation of an aspect of Being. Perhaps this is the destiny of Being. Nonetheless the lack or loss of understanding in people of the manifestation of Being in whatever form it takes, is hurtful to myself as part of the whole of humanity and creation. Perhaps this growing ignorance and darkness is also part of our destiny, but I still feel called by Being itself to explore and disclose the meaning of this and to continue to find ways in which all creation can experience Being for what it is, the ultimate and only truth and reality, the source of all goodness, beauty and love.

For Heidegger, Eckhart and Ibn 'Arabi, everything depends on this encounter with Being. Every other good flows from allowing Being to be realised in our own individual selves and in our culture as a whole. So the question is, what do we do to encourage this encounter with Being? What are the key elements which will show us the door to Being? What and where is the door at which we must knock, where we must sit and wait?

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### Detachment and grounding

As pointed out by many writers a sense of the essential unity of God beyond creation does not mean that there is no meaning to creation itself and to our tasks and values here on earth. Indeed, an over-emphasis on the transcendent can lead to a kind of intellectual nihilism, a kind of atheism. For Eckhart, as for Ibn 'Arabi and also Heidegger in his own way, Being's transcendence and imminence are both necessary for truth to be possible for human beings. This is because we are in our nature both unmade and made, both divine and earthly, and because Truth, Being, which encompasses all, has therefore to encompass both aspects of our nature, of creation and un-creation. The temporary and illusory nature of creation does not in any way mean that there is no purpose to creation, just as the particularly Christian story of sin and redemption does not mean that creation is just an unfortunate inconvenience on our journey to heaven (or hell). Indeed, to Eckhart and other Christian mystics, creation has a meaning beyond any simple story of redemption, transcending any story which is just about human destiny. Ultimately such meaning has to be about God, not us. It is about God's self-understanding and self-realisation, in and through creation. We participate in this through Being.

As such Eckhart looks both to the transcendent God as one path way to Being, and to God imminent in creation as another equally important way of knowing Being. Eckhart calls the first way "detachment", a way of transcending all creation and all ideas, thoughts and feelings in ourselves, and the second way "grounding", finding the ground of God in our souls and in our lives in this world. Detachment enables us to be entirely open to God's Being in its essence and to be free (as far as is possible) from all preconceptions and idols of our minds, while grounding enables us to see Being in its manifestation in creation, giving meaning to our life in creation and giving us the right attitude and relationship to other people and to the natural world.

This grounding leads to what may be called “justice” in Eckhart, or in Ibn ‘Arabi, “courtesy” – respectfully giving to each thing its due. This is in no way an imposition of our need or ideas upon each other and nature. It is the opposite of what Heidegger calls the enframing spirit of “technology”. Rather it is about allowing the true nature of things to show themselves. Each separate thing and act and relationship, correctly understood and respected, discloses something of Being, of God. We have to be receptive to this, and not force our own ideas or desires upon the world. As such it also requires detachment from our preconceptions and openness to the truth of reality in creation.

These two aspects of Being as transcendent and as imminent require two different pathways or approaches, which at the same time as being differently focused, can lead and often do lead to the same total revelation of transcendent and imminent Being. These different ways may be called Detachment and Grounding as explained above. Detachment comes often through the disruption of normality, through a shock of alienation or disjunction, through breakdown as described by Heidegger, but can also be through an intensification of certain activities (such as meditation, pilgrimage, liturgy), leading to the unveiling of the universal essence, or Being, which is at the still centre of everything. Grounding can also be through disruption or intensification, but is based more on a sort of digging into the world and our relationships as a way of exploring and finding their true nature and thereby our own nature<sup>3</sup>. As such detachment and disruption more often relate to transcendent Being and grounding and intensification to imminent Being. All three of these writers see these ways as essential to the unveiling of Being, and use their ideas, style, humour, anecdotes, and, so far as we know, even their personal habits and presence, towards this end (for example Heidegger used to give his lectures in full traditional Bavarian costume!).

However, all three of these writers were intellectuals addressing audiences or congregations or readers intellectually. What is often missing from philosophical studies, and indeed from the thinking of philosophers themselves, is a real understanding of how context affects their thinking. I don’t mean the personal context (of family, schooling etc), though this can be important, nor indeed the intellectual context and tradition, of which all three thinkers were acutely aware, but the more general social, economic and cultural context in which such ideas arose. This context relates to and interacts with non-intellectual parts of the self such as the body and the emotions in their everyday life. It reveals a more plural notion of the self, which doesn’t prioritise one part, as Eckhart and Heidegger prioritise the intellect and Ibn Arabi the heart (as the seat of intellect in Muslim ontology), in regard to opening up the question of Being. If I have any criticism of these writers it is that they take the everyday body and emotions for granted. In other traditions, and particularly in Hindu thought (and within this, especially Tantric philosophy) the body and the emotions are also parts of our self which can lead us to God and to practical as well as divine knowledge in their own way. In this sense every part of our self - physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual – all of which are influenced and affected by the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual aspects of our total context, has the power to transform our understanding of our self and of Being.

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<sup>3</sup> There has been a lot written about Eckhart’s use of the word ground, or grunt in German. Some of this seems to indicate that the ground of Being lies beyond Being itself, and is what we elsewhere describe as the Unity or Essence of Reality. Other mystics commonly use this term, including Ibn Arabi and indeed Heidegger, to indicate the root of our faith and belief. However, I do not think we should divorce the word from its most fundamental meaning of earth or the place on which we dwell. The use of the word ground immediately evokes a solid material reality, even when used in a spiritual sense.

It would be very interesting to compare the use of the word ground and earth in the writings of Eckhart, Heidegger and Julian of Norwich. Earth has a more material meaning and in Julian’s writing, it is the “treasure in the earth” and the labour in the earth, which God seeks in creation, and which is Man’s gift to God. But at the same time the earth is hard toil, dirt and suffering. Through earth we come to understand how our life is grounded in God.



I would like to point out just a few examples from the past of common practices which enabled the disclosure of Being either through disruption or intensification in an entirely non-intellectual way. I want to do this, not as a comprehensive exercise or in any attempt to create an alternative history or schema, but as a way of showing how modernity has much more limited practices in this regard, and as such the task of unveiling is that much more difficult today than it was in much of the past, or in other cultures. I will then make some suggestions for how some more meaningful practices might be revived or created today, thereby complementing or adding to Heidegger's approach in an attempt to make engagement with Being more possible for those who are not necessarily philosophers or poets.

### The problem with the past

The work of Max Weber on the disenchantment of the world through science and bureaucracy during the sixteenth to nineteenth century is well known. Many people have followed his lead in exploring this change and expressing the difference between the pre-modern and modernity in his terms. This is a fruitful area of study and can give much food for thought, as shown for example in the recent work of the philosopher and theologian Charles Taylor in his book *The Secular Age*, who starts his book with the question: "What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age?" He elaborates this at the start of the next chapter by saying: "One way to put the question that I want to answer here is this: why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?" 800 pages later we are somewhat the wiser about the changes in thinking that have occurred, but not really about what it means to *believe* in God either in the past or now. We have not really understood what we are talking about, except at a superficial level.

Just as problematic is that Weber's views are often over-simplified and used to express not the truth about the past, but the prejudices of the present age. There is now an accepted view of the Middle Ages in Western Europe, as a pre-scientific, enchanted world, where it was easy to believe in spirits and God, as well as all kinds of cures, spells and superstitions. In much of current popular thinking, the Middle Ages were "medieval" not in the sense of being a period of history, but in a pejorative sense, evocating a caricature world which was cruel and dirty, full of plagues, witch burning, ignorant peasants, deluded priests and cruel knights.

Of course this is largely a projection of "otherness" from our present age to the past, a way of affirming our notions of progress and our identities as modern people. "Medieval" often incorporates imagined elements taken from both the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the stone ages as well as the much maligned 14<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the whole of the pre-modern past is frequently lumped together as one single time of backwardness, the details of which don't really matter, as they are all just different kinds of primitiveness. Furthermore, contemporary non-western cultures and practices (such as Muslim and tribal societies) are also largely lumped together with this lump of the past, as anyone who is not a western liberal is obviously backward and will one day realise their errors and enter modernity under the liberating banner of progress.

It is difficult in such a context to speak of the difference between our present day western society and different cultural practices either in the contemporary world or at a specific time in the past, without being at once mired in other people's prejudices and deep seated assumptions about personal rights, choice, science and purpose. However, I would like to point out a few practices from the pre-modern era in western history which can at least illustrate that some non-modern customs had a logic and meaning, either intentionally or accidentally, and which allowed people a completely different experience of Being, either as Detachment or Grounding, through either disruption or intensification.

## Carnival, pilgrimage and liturgy – occasions for disruption and intensifying

Carnival as an intrinsic and important part of medieval society has been interpreted in many different ways. It is important to understand that carnival wasn't a "social" event like a village fete or a public concert, or like bonfire night has become today, but a fundamental ritual of renewal, change and danger for the whole of society. Carnival in the early middle ages involved such things as the king being mocked and dressed up as a peasant, while a poor person was crowned king for a day, bishops and priests being ridiculed and parodies of ceremonies being celebrated. At all different levels of society, the world was "turned upside down" not only in excessive behaviour, but in clear inversions of "normal" order. This is just as it was until very recently (and still may be in many villages) at the festival of Holi in northern India, where the lowest castes became the highest for the day and the highest the lowest, where women beat and teased the men, and where the hallucinatory cannabis drink bhang is prescribed as part of the religious festival, so that one's personal reality is also altered.

Carnival for many anthropologists and historians is an integral part of the pre-modern world. It is an essential part of the meaning of a hierarchical society in the true sense of hierarchy as embodying fluid relationships of duty and reciprocity (as described by Louis Dumont in *Homo Hierarchicus*) rather than fixed relationships of power or rights, as are characteristic of social structures nowadays. So how is it essential when it inverts so many primary relationships and meanings? It is partly because the disruptive event reveals the normal order by providing its mirror opposite. At the same time it reveals the temporary and illusory nature of social structure as well as representing alternative visions of both social and natural order. In this multiple act of revelation, it shows the play which is at the heart of our world; in Hindu terms, it is the Krishna Lila, Krishna's playful game, which is the enjoyment and experimentation of God through creation. Perhaps most importantly, as Victor Turner has argued, it reveals unity or "communitas" as he calls it. This unity is not just a social construct, but can also be seen as a cosmic unity, a sense of belonging not only to your village or town, but to the whole of creation. This sense comes through both the body (through the use of narcotics such as alcohol and cannabis for example) as well as the turbulence of emotions created by inversions of relationships, and of course through a collective unconsciousness of the myths and the sacred time and space of the ritual. It works at all levels of the self, through all levels of the world.

There have been many different interpretations of the meaning of carnival but here I just want to point out the existential meaning to individuals, rather than the structural or functional meanings for society as a whole. This is often missed by anthropologists and historians because they have never participated in carnival, or if they have, then they continually objectify their experience and thereby ignore the way it discloses something to them personally. Indeed in McKim Marriott's excellent account of Holi in a north Indian village, he participates in his first year in a blur of Bhang, and in the second year, as an anthropologist. While in the second year he understands much more about the social meaning of the festival, he perhaps also loses the opportunity for personal revelation, for the feeling of all-encompassing love which is at the heart of the Holi, and which is manifested in the inversions and reciprocity which he so skilfully narrates. Nonetheless, even in his anthropological persona, he can see that this is not only about social meaning, but has a direct personal meaning for all participants. Perhaps he uses the memory of his first intoxicated experience to disclose the intensely personal meaning and disclosure which he describes at the end of his article, *The Feast of Love*<sup>4</sup>:

"Here indeed were the many village kinds of love confounded- respectful regard for parents and patrons; the idealized affection for brothers, sisters, and comrades; the longing of man for union with the divine; and the rugged lust of sexual mates -all broken suddenly out of their usual, narrow

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<sup>4</sup> McKim Marriott: *The Feast of Love* in Published in *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, (ed.) Milton Singer, University of Chicago Press, 1971 (1966), pp. 201-212

channels by a simultaneous increase of intensity. Boundless, unilateral love of every kind flooded over the usual compartmentalization and indifference among separated castes and families. Insubordinate libido inundated all established hierarchies of age, sex, caste, wealth, and power.

The dramatic balancing of Holi-the world destruction and world renewal, the world pollution followed by world purification-occurs not only on the abstract level of structural principles, but also in the person of each participant. Under the tutelage of Krishna, each person plays and for the moment may experience the role of his opposite: the servile wife acts the domineering husband, and vice versa; the ravisher acts the ravished; the menial acts the master; the enemy acts the friend; the strictured youths act the rulers of the republic. The observing anthropologist, inquiring and reflecting on the forces that move men in their orbits, finds himself pressed to act the witless bumpkin. Each actor playfully takes the role of others in relation to his own usual self. Each may thereby learn to play his own routine roles afresh, surely with renewed understanding, possibly with greater grace, perhaps with a reciprocating love."

This was indeed my own experience of playing Holi in Delhi and in a village south of Delhi in the two years of my stay in India in the 1980s. It was an intensely personal and communal experience, made more intense by the Bhang, the music and dancing, the cowdung and urine which was poured over my head by some young flirtatious women, the beating of our group of young men by women with large sticks, and the general colour and chaos of the day. But what is also experienced at a deeper sense, and through reflection and memory over the whole year, is a detachment from normality and a grounding in something beyond. These memories are still vivid to me 30 years after the events.

The elimination of carnival in Europe since the sixteenth century has entirely changed our sense of reality and our relationship with society and the world. EP Thompson writes brilliantly about how carnival changed to riot and a reciprocal hierarchical society changed to a non-reciprocal class based society in his article *The Moral Economy of the Crowd*, where he examines traditional and modern customs of upheaval during the Eighteenth century. But this change away from carnival to riot was not just about social change, but was an existential change, a change in the way we understand our meaning and potential as human beings. We no longer had the opportunity to feel and realise in our selves the illusory nature of the social and economic order of the time, or to understand ourselves as embraced in the Whole in eternity, in the oneness of love or truth which is at the heart of true creation. Of course for many if not most people, carnival was just a time for getting drunk and letting off steam, but for a significant few, it was much more than this, it was a revelation, and for society as a whole it was a cosmic act of re-creation and disclosure of meaning.

Pilgrimage was also an activity which disrupted normal life and through its intensification of certain practices allowed an existential breakdown and breakthrough for pilgrims. Pilgrimage is not about getting on a coach to Lourdes or a flight to Rome. In its pre-modern form it requires long periods of walking, hunger, tiredness and dirt. An excellent account of this can be found in the book *Fluid Signs*, by EV Daniel, where he describes a Hindu pilgrimage in Tamil Nadu, mostly through his own personal experience. He uses a method of analysis based upon the psychology of Charles Pierce to show how the multiplicity of ideas and relationships in the pilgrim group were steadily reduced by the physical process and cultural structure of the pilgrimage to a dual and then a single form of consciousness. He describes how, after a month's preparation of fasting, abstinence and prayer, the pilgrimage culminated in a gruelling three day, 40 mile barefoot walk around a holy mountain with 10,000 other people in the mid-day sun and heat. Daniel's description of this is graphic. The groups of pilgrims, who are mainly peasants, start off with great enthusiasm, singing and praising God, but as they get progressively worn out in the heat and dust of the mountain trek, the singing is gradually reduced until it becomes just a single verse or chant interspersed with ever longer periods of silence. The conditions of the 10,000 people on the mountain are sweaty, uncomfortable and dirty, so that after two days Daniels found that all that existed for him, was him and the path/pain/dirt. The lack of

toilet facilities for so many pilgrims was for him particularly overwhelming. “The world is shit” was his profound realisation, both metaphorically and literally. Nothing else existed.

But then when he reached the summit, even he did not exist. There was only oneness – a oneness of utter bliss and fulfilment.

There is not time to dwell on the structure and meaning of pilgrimage, but the loss of true pilgrimage as a way to experience detachment and grounding at the same time, through disruption of normal life and intensification of certain practices, again means that for ordinary people we have lost an opportunity to explore Being through non-intellectual means.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, liturgy was and still is in some countries a way of perpetual pilgrimage to those who follow it with sincerity. In Christian countries, the period of Lent and Holy Week form a unity which can be extremely powerful in disrupting our normal life and intensifying our prayer and worship. In the Muslim calendar, Ramadan, is an equivalent period. However, these have to be done with intensity and faith if they are to have power. It is no good turning up to half the services or processions, or not fasting fully or keeping vigil. In Christendom, these liturgical events were far more common and better supported in the past and, in combination with the greater faith of people, far more moving and revealing for individuals. In Islam, it seems that Ramadan and liturgy in general is much better maintained and celebrated, as indeed is pilgrimage. Christian churches have a lot to learn from their Muslim brothers and sisters.

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#### Work, craft and labour

Carnival, pilgrimage and liturgy were primarily disruptive events for societies and individuals. Here I just want to point out also that normal life for pre-modern people also offered different opportunities for understanding the essence of creation in a way now no longer available.

Currently 80% of the working population of the UK works in the service industries. Around 10% work in construction, less than 1% in agriculture, and less than 1% in making clothes. And yet shelter, food and clothing provide the essential goods which we need to survive and thrive as human beings.

In the middle ages, around 70% worked in agriculture, 10% in construction, 5% in clothing, and 10% in other crafts such as mining, blacksmithing, cartmaking, furniture making etc. Merchants and service industries were a very small proportion of the economy. [ Check!!]

From the point of view of efficiency of course, our economy is now far quicker and more productive. A large computerised tractor can do the work of over 100 labourers with ease, and robotic factories churn out goods at the flick of a switch. In consequence, we spend our days “getting and spending”, or sitting in front of our laptops, buying and selling stuff which we don’t even see.

However, what is the effect on Man’s soul of this change in work? This is the question which EF Schumacher asks in his book Good Work. He concludes that “Modern industrial society is immensely complicated, immensely involved, making immense claims on man’s time and attention. This, I think, must be accounted its greatest evil. Paradoxical as it may seem, modern industrial society, in spite of an incredible proliferation of labour-saving devices, has not given people more time to devote to their all-important spiritual tasks; it has made it exceedingly difficult for anyone, except the most

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<sup>5</sup> See my writing on Trauma and Mysticism 2 for further thoughts on pilgrimage and the way that the structure relates also to the experience of traumatic bereavement in the reduction of the self to a duality of I and Loss, and then to the unity of suffering beyond self.

determined, to find anytime whatever for these tasks.” Schumacher also says that working 12 hours a day at a menial task, such as being an agricultural labourer, still gives more time for these essential tasks than working less time in a modern office, and this is borne out by accounts of farm labourers in oral history accounts from before the first world war, who worked hard, but still had plenty of time to “stand and stare” not just like a dumb animal, but with profound, though perhaps wordless, thought and reflection.

But it is not just the amount and quality of time and the busyness of the mind that is different now for us, but the nature of work itself. Having spent 15 years working with natural materials in construction, I appreciate how satisfying and meaningful it is to build a dwelling from the resources to hand in a place. In our village in the Chilterns, due to the mixed geology, there were clay pits, sand pits and chalk pits, producing clay bricks and tiles, quick lime, limewashes and other paint finishes, and mortars for every application. There were also trees for making rafters, joists, floorboards and windows. In fact, virtually everything necessary for a traditional house was available within a few miles.

I am not saying that this is a good thing for ecological or environmental reasons. Indeed, I have often seen it argued by people, that larger factories are more resource efficient and less polluting. It is good however in terms of grounding, of understanding and feeling the true nature of things and processes. To dig clay and form it into bricks and then burn it to make the bricks water resistant and strong is a remarkable thing. To take chalk and burn it to make quick lime which is then slaked with dramatic and dangerous effect to make lime putty or hot mortars, is also an almost alchemical process which tells us about transformation as well as nature. To bind these materials together into a dwelling discloses us both as a revealer of nature and a creator of new worlds, in a way which is tangible and comprehensible to even the least educated or intelligent person. The topping out ceremony as the roof was completed on a new house, was, like the harvest home, a celebration of Man as co-worker with God in this creation.

But this was not working to impose our ideas or technology upon nature. This working with natural materials and simple hand tools allowed the true nature of things to become apparent. For example, if you have a piece of wood, it is much easier to plane it with the grain than to go across grain. With power tools, this difference can be missed or ignored. Everything can be put through the power planer. We miss the knots and twists in the wood, which are there because it was grown in a particular place and way amid particular other trees, bushes, or rocks, where its struggle for light meant it twisted in a certain direction, or put out an additional branch to harvest the light to its leaves. Every difference reveals something of the wood’s life and the world’s variety, truth and beauty.

Being grounded by our daily work can be seen as distraction from Being, requiring disruption. But disruption only has meaning if normality has a pattern and consistency to make the disruption sufficiently dramatic to unveil meaning behind both the normality and the disruption itself. The act of creation itself can be disruptive by its beauty, if that beauty is grounded in nature. This was something explained by Jane Carroll in her article on 12<sup>th</sup> century Cordoba<sup>6</sup> and the Great Mosque where Ibn Arabi had his first revelation of Being. Cordoba was considered like paradise in poetry and other writings of the time and was not only a beautiful architectural place, but had a library with

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<sup>6</sup> The Circle and the Square; Interpenetration of Heaven and Earth in the Andalusia of Ibn ‘Arabi, by Jane Carroll in the Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society Vol 60 2016 pp 1-27

over 400,000 books and a tradition of incredible learning and wisdom<sup>7</sup>. The Mosque and its patterned tiles and decorations based upon natural forms and geometrical shapes was the physical embodiment of a philosophy of nature and God combined. This was perhaps partly why Ibn Arabi was overwhelmed with Being for the first time at the age of 18, in this place.

But if we surround ourselves with ugliness based upon a lack of respect for nature and natural forms, as well as a lack of humanity, then we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to find Being in our everyday lives, in everyday ways.

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A society based upon the disclosure of Being

From the perspective of Ibn Arabi, Eckhart and Heidegger, western society (and, increasingly, global culture) is based upon false values and self-deception. The result is not only ugliness, unhappiness, and ecological devastation, but the loss of meaning of what it is to be human, and the loss of the potential for people to realise their true role and place in creation. This loss of potential, as I have explained above, results not just from a changing intellectual context, but from the material and cultural context in which we operate. If people do not live in contact with material environments and cultures which are oriented, at least in part, towards the disclosure of Being, but on the contrary if people are treated as economic units with purely physical requirements and no spiritual needs, then it becomes far more difficult to be moved by the truth inherent in every aspect of creation and to perceive the essential Being which underlies all creation. On the other hand, a society based upon the disclosure of Being would become beautiful and fully human in all ways, as a natural and spontaneous result of its inherent intention. Of course no society may ever such exist and there is also meaning to sin, suffering and selfishness, but at the moment there is little to balance such things. We, in the modern West, live in a deep and unremitting kind of darkness.

However, even if people accept the arguments given in this essay about the priority of Being and the incorrect way we assess society and the past, they may argue that we cannot turn back the clock to a time before modernity, not only for practical reasons (what to do with 4 billion people living in cities?) but because people don't want to go back to a world before cars, TVs and air-conditioning, and before meritocracy and human rights.

Such questions may seem important from a rational point of view but in fact are a distraction from the task of revealing Being to ourselves and humankind. As stated above, Being is not another category like human rights or culture or prosperity. When we say that we want a society based upon the disclosure of Being, this is not something we can add to a list of other aims. While I have tried to suggest practical ways that might help to enable the disclosure of Being, these are not a programme of activities which could be organised on a national or international scale, like an education programme – in fact all these could obscure Being rather than disclosing it, if undertaken in the wrong way. So we are not suggesting that we turn off modernity and revert to pre-industrial bliss, which anyway never existed. We need to stop trying to control our destiny and the consequences of our every action. We need to stop worrying about how things will work out and how we eliminate evil or suffering. We need to stop thinking it is all about us.

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<sup>7</sup> Carroll quotes Ibn Khafaja and the nun Hroswitha of Gandesheim who both witnessed to the beauty and wisdom in Cordoba in the early middle ages. Hroswitha, who was a nun in the court of Otto I in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, wrote: The brilliant ornament of the world shone in the west....Cordoba was its name and it was wealthy and famous and known for its pleasures and resplendent in all things, especially for its seven streams of wisdom [which refers to the seven liberal arts taught there].

Being is beyond us and must come to us in our utter poverty and emptiness. It exists outside of history, and yet *is* history, in its totality, in its wholeness and meaning. If we try to control or define it, we will be utterly lost to it.

Instead we have to embrace the paradoxical nature of Being to be able to understand how to live and act. It requires our imagination in a new and profound way, because the world will change as we see it, when we allow Being to be “the seeing of our eyes and the hearing of our ears”, when we reach down into the foundation of our souls and glimpse unity.

Change will be invisible. Those who realise Being are not seeking acknowledgement but are the unseen servants of Being. They are hidden by their servanthood and humility from the world.

For Ibn ‘Arabi, this paradoxical state is expressed in the anonymity of those who are perfected. These “are those who know and are not known”. “Their state is the state of the common people”. “They do not distinguish themselves from the faithful who perform God’s obligation by any extra state whereby they might be known. They walk in the markets, they speak to the people and none of God’s creatures sees any of them distinguishing himself from the common people by a single thing... They are alone with God, firmly rooted, not wavering from their servanthood for the blink of an eye.... They witness Him constantly in their eating and drinking, their waking and sleeping, and their speaking with Him among the people.”<sup>8</sup> Such people are the most important from a divine perspective and yet, in some ways, are perceived as the most irrelevant from the world’s perspective.

They do nothing, and yet these are the pillars on which the cosmos rests. They are both the salvation and the purpose of creation. Without them the world decays and ultimately will disappear, if there is not one left through whom Being is able to witness Himself through His creation. And yet all things are only the manifestation of God, so how can anything be amiss? This is the question which Julian of Norwich, another important mystic, asks in and through her revelations. It is answered partly by the knowledge that “with Man this is impossible. But with God all things are possible” (cf Gospels quote). But it is also answered by creation itself, by the meaning that arises even in sin, suffering and ignorance.

But this questioning is also a necessary bewilderment, as Ibn Arabi argues, to force us to give up our attempts to control our reality or “solve” problems. They drive us to abandoning our rationality and our will. These problems cannot be solved except through returning to the source of all creation and reality, and of the essential truth beyond all creation, where the impossible becomes possible at every instance, and always.

And yet why do we care? Why does Ibn ‘Arabi bother to write his many books? Why even did Mohammed write? Or the authors of the Gospels, or of any other true religious text for that matter?

“I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known. So I created the creatures that I might be known”. We seek the disclosure of Being as part of our destiny and of Being’s will<sup>9</sup>.

In such a situation I think it is right to ask how we should seek this disclosure. This question is ultimately what Ibn ‘Arabi, Eckhart and Heidegger were attempting to answer. My point is that unless you have a context which enables this question to be asked meaningfully, then it is difficult even to utter the question.

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<sup>9</sup> All words are the words of God, of Being. We speak or write as a manifestation of Being, usually unconsciously, and as a consequence, confusedly. But some words, the words of revelation, come directly from Being. These are the words which we should listen to, above all.

## Strategies of detachment and grounding in today's world

Heidegger has given us some clues about how to open up oneself or a culture to the possibility of Being. His writings on art and poetry in particular can give us clues as to how to think. But they are clues about the thinking of highly intelligent and motivated people. Ibn 'Arabi and Eckhart also give us many clues, but they speak to us from a disembodied and different past, from a place too far beyond the boundary of modernity for most people. Furthermore, they are also intellectual arguments from highly intellectual people. All three writers also speak with humour, poetry and paradox, but in the end they still require of their readers considerable concentration and intellectual reflection. But is this the only way in which we can open up an approach to Being? Are there things we can do in the everyday world which will lead to clearings where there is more opportunity for Being to show itself?

If the argument in this paper is correct, we should look for ways in the modern world which can encourage genuine detachment and grounding through disruption and intensification, through activities which still have power and potential for unveiling. These activities can relate to any part of the self – body, mind, heart or soul – because all parts of the self have their own kind of knowledge and connection with the Real. They can be activities which are not in any way intellectual, or which combine different kinds of knowing. The more these can become embedded practices within parts of our lives, the easier it will be to find the door and to knock, or at least to sit there and wait.

But before we find these ways, do we not need to prepare ourselves and our world, for detachment and grounding? Indeed the preparation may be the only thing we can do – choosing the right pathway, which in turn will direct us and lead us on. As Eckhart said, to be a follower of the truth is to be a beginner amongst beginners. It is the intention to begin on this course which is important and the finding of the first pathway.

As Schumacher correctly identified the greatest evil of modern society is its busyness and complexity. To prepare oneself for the advent of Being, we must be less busy and more simple. We cannot be surprised or disrupted in our everyday lives if they are one continuous and homogenous round of activity, if they are only one kind of Time. We need the disjunction of different kinds of time to create the possibility of detachment.

One obvious way to create different times is to re-instate holy days. The most important of these in western society is the Sabbath (Saturday for Jews, Sunday for Christians), which until recently did have a different character to weekdays (and even now still feels different to a lot of us). Other holy days such as celebrated in the liturgical year should also be honoured fully, and indeed have a different character to both weekdays and the Sabbath. At once there could be a plurality of times which we can experience.

But the busyness of modern life quickly spills over into these holy days, even when they are kept with strict self-control. If we attempt to step off a moving train, then the momentum of that train continues as we hit the standing ground, and we have to run not to fall over. The momentum of busy lives is now so great that our minds cannot switch into other times without time to slow down. So the problem is not really solved by having Sundays off, however beneficial this might be in many ways. The problem we have to address also is the busyness in our weekday, working and everyday lives.

For young people this situation is worse in many ways than for older people. The amount of debt that is incurred by young people in their education, and the cost of housing are both so great that for most young people just living simply is extremely challenging. Buying or renting a house puts them



into a kind of slavery, worse than many traditional forms of slavery, because it binds them at all times, and it also binds their partners and children. Many young couples now both have to work to pay the mortgage, and if they can afford to have children then they are often unable to give up work to properly love and care for their young offspring. Putting babies and toddlers into nursery from a very young age can lead to loss of self esteem and a sense of abandonment in children, from which many never fully recover. But it also significantly affects the parents, particularly the mothers who feel torn apart by this loss, and then become lost to the incredible wisdom that comes from just being with babies and toddlers – just watching and caring for them. Parents cannot grow up without their children.

The point I am making here is that the current economic and social structure makes it increasingly difficult for people to stand outside the world of work. This pressure is on everyone in different ways, not only those struggling with housing and children, but with anyone in any kind of work. Every job and activity is challenged by the essence of technology to be ever more productive, under continual assessment and re-assessment, as every person is treated more and more as a resource for the destiny of “progress”. This is a central feature of modern society which is not only dangerous for our sanity and health, but also for our realisation of our true selves and of Being. These are obviously connected. But to address this situation we must address Being, and not get caught up in downstream arguments about how to improve health and well-being within this current world. All true virtues and right actions have to stem from an engagement with Being itself.

There are personal actions we can take within this current world, and there are social actions which we should and must also take. The personal actions only become meaningful if we are engaged with the world, just at the essence of Being can only be addressed in any meaningful sense through its manifestation in creation.

The following are some brief but in no way comprehensive ideas of things we could do personally and socially, according to our calling and ability.

*Personal actions:* Finding a clearing in the modern world

1. Grounding in a place: local distinctiveness, slow movement, dwelling fully. How long does it take to know a place? What does it mean to dwell fully?
2. Grounding in work: hand crafts and skills. Taking time to know how to garden a particular plot of land, to lay a dry stone wall with a certain type of stone on a certain hillside, to take wood and use the character and grain to form something which reveals its being in use or ornament.
3. Grounding in parenthood and caring for family. Taking time to make a home, to observe the miracles of birth and growth and to suffer the sorrows of loss.
4. Retreats: finding space for days or weeks to stand back and reflect
5. Pilgrimages: a revival in pilgrimage as walking, taking proper time out, and learning about Being through exhaustion and devotion.
6. Liturgy: both taking daily liturgy seriously, as for example in a Benedictine monastery or by saying morning and evening prayer each day, and also taking the liturgical year seriously, particularly the times of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter. Fasting during these periods can be remarkably revealing. It is better done as part of a group or church than as an individual. Western Christians can learn a lot from the Muslim practice of Ramadan.
7. Suffering: Eckhart says at the end of his essay *On Detachment* that if you would take the quickest route to detachment, then this is through suffering. Suffering is always with us in our hospitals, hospices and homes. We need a new approach to suffering as a resource for our society, not as something to be removed or cleaned up. Having spent some time recently

in hospital, I was amazed how quickly people turn to the eternal questions and are open to new revelations about themselves and the world. In particular those who have been in Intensive Care Units and those suffering traumatic episodes have a vital gift to our world – Being is revealed through our broken bodies.

8. Dying better: this follows from the point above. The death of loved ones, particularly traumatic or sudden death, is a shock to most people and it should be seen as a way of exploring Being, not as something to “get over”. How and when do we open up important questions to people who are grieving? How do we start to contemplate the gift of our own mortality?
9. Near Death Experiences (NDEs): there is also a growing community of people who have had Near Death Experiences, with out-of-body visions and an overwhelming sense of unity and love. Currently these experiences are excluded from medical and scientific research, but they can speak to people very strongly and transform lives.

#### *Social actions:*

1. Breaking up the money system: the current money-creation system is at the heart of the financial and economic system and is destroying lives, localities and human scale economies. We must find ways to resist and change this. See [www.positivemoney.org.uk](http://www.positivemoney.org.uk), also see the Grip of Death by Michael Rowbotham, the work of Feasta in Ireland. However breaking up the money system must be done with a new understanding of the meaning of money and of progress.
2. This is closely linked to the obsession with economic growth as the most important aim of modern societies. This also must be resisted and changed. See Tim Jackson’s work Prosperity without Growth; the Papal Encyclical Laudato ‘Si; the work of the New Economics Foundation. Again we must question deeply about meaning and purpose for society. It is not enough just to move to a steady state economy. See also I. Illich Tools for Conviviality and EF Schumacher Good Work
3. Re-establishment of meaningful constraints in our society through whatever means possible, preferably nationally adopted and enforced. Important constraints are:
  - a) Sundays as quiet, non-commercial days.
  - b) Constraints on working practices/ hours/ emails
  - c) Constraints on the use of computers and phones by children in particular
4. Further more radical ideas:
  - a) from the New Economics Foundation: campaign for a working week of 21 hours
  - b) Community Mondays: an additional day off for everyone where community work/ care/ environmental work etc is undertaken in locally based programmes
5. Breaking the grip of scientism and technological “progress”: it is important to create an intellectual clearing within the current scientific paradigm to allow Being to emerge both personally and socially. The dominance of reductionist and neo-darwinian thinking in most academic and public institutions is dangerously prohibitive of a public discourse on Being. This requires opening up. See the Scientific and Medical Network <https://explore.scimednet.org/> and also Rupert Sheldrake’s book The Science Delusion.
6. Thinking – think tanks for new understandings and questions, which feed into the above points. This thinking could come from universities, but more importantly from churches, mosques, synagogues and temples. We need to return to the central questions in religion and philosophy - the question of transcendent and imminent Being.

These are all things which we can attempt to do in our society now. Some of them may take years or even a life time. Some of them will come to us by chance or surprise. Some we will not welcome, but we will have to accept and embrace, even in our sorrow.

However, nothing that we might do or which might happen to us is outside of Being, so we should also live without fear or anxiety, even in the worse situations. As Eckhart shows in his book of Divine Consolation, we should live with hope and faith, even when threatened with trauma, pain or torture, because “God is in our pain and God is our pain”. At the heart of God, at the root of the Godhead, is Being, just as Being is the ground of every aspect of our lives and our world. Why should we be afraid?

The most important thing we can do is to empty ourselves and sit in poverty and servanthood at the door of Being. We should speak only if we feel that Being speaks to and through us. Any actions we take should be rooted in this knowledge of Being. Only such direct revelation of Being has meaning and power.

Only Being can save us.

28/04/2017

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