

Awareness: The Perils and Opportunities of Reality

Anthony de Mello

Foreword

A man found an eagle's egg and put it in a nest of barnyard hen. The eaglet hatched with the brood of chicks and grew up with them.

All his life the eagle did what the barnyard chicks did, thinking he was a barnyard chicken. He scratched the earth for worms and insects. He clucked and cackled. And he would thrash his wings and fly a few feet into the air.

Years passed and the eagle grew very old. One day he saw a magnificent bird above him in the cloudless sky. It glided in graceful majesty among the powerful wind currents, with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings.

The old eagle looked up in awe. "Who's that?" he asked.

"That's the eagle, the king of the birds," said his neighbor. "He belongs to the sky. We belong to the earth - we're chickens." So the eagle lived and died a chicken, for that's what he thought he was.

Astonished? At first I felt downright insulted! Was he publicly likening me to a barnyard chicken? In a sense, yes, and also, no. Insulting? Never. That wasn't Tony's way. But he was telling me and these people that in his eyes I was a "golden eagle," unaware of the heights to which I could soar.

This was Tony de Mello at his best, proclaiming the message of "awareness"

Are we talking about psychology in this spirituality course?

It's only when you're sick of your sickness that you'll get out of it. Most people go to a psychiatrist or a psychologist to get relief. I repeat: to get relief. Not to get out of it.

Neither is Renunciation the Solution

Anytime you're practicing renunciation, you're deluded. How about *that!* You're deluded. What are you renouncing? Any time you renounce something, you are tied forever to the thing you renounce. There's a guru in India who says, "Every time a prostitute comes to me, she's talking about nothing but God. She says I'm sick of this life that I'm living. I want God. But every time a priest comes to me he's talking about nothing but sex." Very well, when you renounce something, you're stuck to it forever.

Don't renounce it, *see through it*. Understand its true value and you won't need to renounce it;

The Masquerade of Charity

Charity is really self-interest masquerading under the form of altruism.

What's on Your Mind?

And so in order to wake up, the one thing you need most of all is the readiness to learn something new. The chances that you will wake up are in direct proportion to the amount of truth you can take without running away.

Good, Bad, or Lucky

We differ from others - from criminals, for example - only in what we do or don't do, *not in what we are*.

Our Illusion of Others

Are you ready to be brainwashed by someone who's enlightened? You can be brainwashed by anybody, you know. What does it matter whether someone's enlightened or not? But see, we want to lean on someone, don't we? We want to lean on anybody we think has arrived.

But then, you forget that you have it all right now anyway, and you don't know it. Why not concentrate on the now instead of hoping for better times in the future? Why not understand the now instead of forgetting it and hoping for the future? Isn't the future just another trap?

Self Observation

The only way someone can be of help to you is in challenging your ideas.

The trouble with people is that they're busy fixing things they don't even understand. We're always fixing things, aren't we? It never strikes us that things don't need to be fixed. They really don't. This is a great illumination.

They need to be understood. If you understood them, they'd change.

Finding Yourself

Like the little girl who says to a little boy, "Are you a Presbyterian?" and he said, "No, we belong to another abomination!"

Stripping Down to the 'I'

"I" is something other and more than the body. You might say the body is part of "I," but it is a changing part. It keeps moving, it keeps changing. We have the same name for it but it constantly changes. Just as we have the same name for Niagara Falls, but Niagara Falls is constituted by water that is constantly changing. We use the same name for an ever-changing reality.

How Happiness Happens

There's a famous story about the lion who came upon a flock of sheep and to his amazement found a lion among the sheep. It was a lion who had been brought up by the sheep ever since he was a cub. It would bleat like a sheep and run around like a sheep. The lion went straight for him, and when the sheep-lion stood in front of the real one, he trembled in every limb. And the lion said to him, "What are you doing among these sheep?" And the sheep-lion said, "I am a sheep." And the lion said, "Oh no you're not. You're coming with me." So he took the sheep-lion to a pool and said, "Look!" And when the sheep-lion looked at his reflection in the water, he let out a mighty roar, and in that moment he was transformed. He was never the same again.

If you're lucky and the gods are gracious or if you are gifted with divine grace (use any theological expression you want), you might suddenly understand who "I" is, and you'll never be the same again, never. Nothing will ever be able to touch you again and no one will ever be able to hurt you again.

You will fear no one and you will fear nothing.

You fear no one because you're perfectly content to be nobody.

There's a lovely saying of Tranxu, a great Chinese sage that I took the trouble to learn by heart. It goes: "When the archer shoots for no particular prize, he has all his skills; when he shoots to win a brass buckle, he is already nervous; when he shoots for a gold prize, he goes blind, sees two targetws, and is out of his mind. His skill has not changed, but the prize divides him. He cares! He thinks more of winning than shooting, and the need to win drains him of power." Isn't that an image of what most people are? When you're living for nothing, you've got all your skills, you've got all your energy, you're relaxed, you don't care, it doesn't matter whether you win or lose.

Margin note: Carolyn @ work comment

Someone once said, "The three most difficult things for a human being are not physical feats or intellectual achievements. They are, first, returning love for hate; second, including the excluded; third, admitting that you are wrong."

Is it possible for the rose to say, "I will give my fragrance to the good people who smell me, but I will withhold it from the bad"? Or is it possible for the lamp to say, "I will give my light to the good people in this room, but I will withhold it from the evil people"? Or can a tree say, "I'll give my shade to the good people who rest under me, but I will withhold it from the bad"? These are images of what love is about.

There's only one reason why you're not experiencing bliss at this present moment, and it's because you're thinking or focusing on what you don't have. Otherwise you would be experiencing bliss. You're focusing on what you don't have. But, right now, you have everything you need to be in bliss.

Obstacles to Happiness

To acquire happiness you don't have to do anything, because happiness cannot be acquired. Does anybody know why? Because we have it already. How can you acquire what you already have? Then why don't you *experience* it?

Four Steps to Wisdom

The fourth step: How do you change things? How do you change yourselves? There are many things you must understand here, or rather, just one thing that can be expressed in many ways. Imagine a patient who goes to a doctor and tells him what he is suffering from. The doctor says, "Very well, I've understood your symptoms. Do you know what I will do? I will prescribe a medicine for your neighbor!" The patient replies, "Thank you very much, Doctor,

that makes me feel much better.” Isn’t that absurd? But that’s what we all do. The person who is asleep always thinks he’ll feel better if somebody else changes. You’re suffering because you are asleep, but you’re thinking, “How wonderful life would be if my neighbor change, my wife changed, my boss changed.

We always want someone else to change so that we will feel good. But has it ever struck you that even if your wife changes or your husband changes, what does that do to you? You’re just as vulnerable as before; you’re just as idiotic as before; you’re just as asleep as before. You are the one who needs to change, who needs to take medicine. You keep insisting, “I feel good because the world is right.” *Wrong!* The world is right because I feel good. That’s what all the mystics are saying.

Sleepwalking

“Well, how different everything looks.” We see people and things not as they are, but as we are. That is why when two people look at something or someone, you get two different reactions. We see things and people not as they are, but as we are.

Change as Greed

Think of somebody you are living with or working with whom you do not like, who causes negative feelings to arise in you. Let’s help you to understand what’s going on. The first thing you need to understand is that the negative feeling is inside you. You are responsible for the negative feelings to arise in you. You are responsible for the negative feeling, not the other person. Someone else in your place would be perfectly calm and at ease in the presence of this person; they wouldn’t be affected. *You* are. Now, understand another thing, that you’re making a demand. You have an expectation of this person. Can you get in touch with that? Then say to this person, “I have no right to make any demands on you.” In saying that, you will drop your expectation. “I Have no right to make any demands on you. Oh, I’ll protect myself from the consequences of your actions or your moods or whatever, but you can go right ahead and be what you choose to be. I have no right to make any demands on you.”

Hugging Memories

If you want to see how true this is, listen: A religious sister from India goes out to make a retreat. Everybody in the community is saying, “Oh, we know, that’s part of her charisma; she’s always attending workshops and going to retreats; nothing will ever change her.” Now, it so happens that the sister does change at this particular workshop, or therapy group, or whatever it is. She changes; everyone notices the difference. Everyone says, “My, you’ve really come to some insights, haven’t you?” She has, and they can see the difference in her behavior, in her body, in her face. You always do when there’s an inner change. It always registers in your face, in your eyes, in your body. Well, the sister goes back to her community, and since the community has a prejudiced, fixed idea about her, they’re going to continue to look at her through the eyes of that prejudice. They’re the only ones who don’t see any change in her. They say, “Oh well, she seems a little more spirited, but just wait, she’ll be depressed again.” And within a few weeks she *is* depressed again; she’s reacting to their reaction. And they all say, “See, we told you so; she hasn’t changed.” But the tragedy is that she had, only they didn’t see it. Perception has devastating consequences in the matter of love and human relationships.

Getting Concrete

“The day you teach the child the name of the bird, the child will never see that bird again.” How true! The first time the child sees that fluffy, alive, moving object, and you say to him, “Sparrow,” then tomorrow when the child sees another fluffy, moving object similar to it he says, “Oh, sparrows. I’ve seen sparrows. I’m *bored* by sparrows.”

Let’s suppose, for example, there is an enormous wind outside and I want people in my country to get an idea of what an American gale or hurricane is like. So I capture it in a cigar box and I go back home and say, “Look at this.” Naturally, it isn’t a gale anymore, is it? Once it’s *captured*. Or if I want you to get the feel of what the flow of a river is like and I bring it to you in a bucket. The moment I put it into a bucket it stopped flowing. The moment you put things into a concept, they stop flowing; they become static, dead. A frozen wave is not a wave. A wave is essentially movement, action; when you freeze it, it is not a wave. Concepts are always frozen. Reality flows.

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Filtered Reality

But there's another demon, too, who's doing the filtering. It's called attachment, desire, craving. The root of all sorrow is craving.

What are people doing all through their lives? They're busy fighting; fight, fight, fight. That's what they call survival. When the average American says they are making a living, it isn't a living they're making, oh no! They have much more than they need to live. Come to my country and you'll see that. You don't need all those cars to live. You don't need a television set to live. You don't need makeup to live. You don't need all those clothes to live. But try to convince the average American of this. They've been brainwashed; they've been programmed. So they work and strive to get the desired object that will make them happy.

Detachment

___ I'm quite amused, sometimes, to see even seemingly objective people like therapists and spiritual directors say of someone, "He's a great guy, great guy, I really like him." I find out later that it's because he likes me that I like him. I look into myself, and I find the same thing coming up now and again: If you're attached to appreciation and praise, you're going to view people in terms of their threat to your attachment or their fostering of your attachment.

More Words

Mark Twain put it very nicely when he said, "It was so cold that if the thermometer had been an inch longer, we would have frozen to death." We do freeze to death on words. It's not the cold outside that matters, but the thermometer. It's not reality that matters, but what you're saying to yourself about it.

Hidden Agendas

You will never understand yourself if you seek to change yourself. The harder you try to change yourself, the worse it gets.

It sounds strange in a culture where we've been trained to achieve goals, to get somewhere, but in fact there's nowhere to go because you're there already. The Japanese have a nice way of putting it: The day you cease to travel, you will have arrived."

Giving In

The more you resist something, the greater power you give to it.

Assorted Images

Let's talk more about effortlessness in change. I thought of a nice image for that, a sailboat. When a sailboat has a mighty wind in its sail, it glides along so effortlessly that the boatman has nothing to do but steer. He makes no effort; he doesn't push the boat. That's an image of what happens when change comes about through awareness, through understanding.

Losing Control

I'm going to quote a great man here, a man named A. S. Neill. He is the author of *Summerhill*. Neill says that the sign of a sick child is that he is always hovering around his parents; he is interested in *persons*. The healthy child has no interest in persons, he is interested in *thing*. When a child is sure of his mother's love, he forgets his mother; he goes out to explore the world; he is curious. He looks for a frog to put in his mouth - that kind of thing. When a child is hovering around his mother, it's a bad sign; he's insecure. Maybe his mother has been trying to suck

love *out* of him, not give him all the freedom and assurance he wants. His mother's always been threatening in many subtle ways to abandon him.

Listening to Life

In the 1970s, President Carter appealed to the American people to go in for austerity. I thought to myself: He shouldn't tell them to be austere, he should really tell them to enjoy things. Most of them have lost their capacity for enjoyment. I really believe that most people in affluent countries have lost that capacity. They've got to have more and more expensive gadgets; they can't enjoy the simple things of life. Then I walk into places where they have all the most marvelous music, and you get these records at a discount, they're all stacked up, but I never hear anybody listening to them - no time, no time, no time. They're guilty, no time to enjoy life. They're overworked, go, go, go. If you really enjoy life and the simple pleasures of the senses, you'd be amazed. You'd develop that extraordinary discipline of the animal. An animal will never overeat. Left in its natural habitat, it will never be overweight.

When you have enjoyed something intensely, you need very little. It's like people who are busy planning their vacation; they spend months planning it, and they get to the spot, and they're all anxious about their reservations for flying back. But they're taking pictures alright, and later they'll show you pictures in an album, of a place they never saw but only photographed. That's a symbol of modern life. I cannot warn you enough about this kind of asceticism. Slow down and taste and smell and hear, and let your senses come alive. If you want a royal road to mysticism, sit down quietly and listen to all the sounds around you. You do not focus on any one sound; you try to hear them all. Oh, you'll see the miracles that happen to you when your senses come unclogged. That is extremely important for the process of change.

Dead Ahead

I've often said to people that the way to really live is to die.