

Peaking Behind the Curtain

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Introduction

Is there anybody here who **didn't** see the Wizard of Oz? The whole movie was pretty spectacular and memorable, especially the flying monkeys, but I want to draw your memories to the part where they all go to meet the great oz and get all the things they've been told he can give them; a brain, a heart, courage, and a trip home. Remember how they were terrified, and fearful, and all trembly (oohhh), at the power of the voice, and the big smoke and image? And how Toto, with the infinite wisdom of a little dog that gets carried around in a picnic basket, figured something was up behind the curtain and went and took a look? Sure enough something was up behind the curtain; not at all what any of them expected, but there was most definitely something behind the curtain.

This has to be the greatest "peak behind the curtain" scene ever created. And if you don't view it literally, there are some pretty interesting elements. For example the group looking to a great power to provide them with what they need, the profound disappointment in seeing there was no power behind the curtain, and the great revelation that what they sought was really within themselves all along. Some kind of thinly veiled metaphor perhaps? It made me wonder; maybe I'd actually come up with something new. Imagine my disappointment when I googled "wizard of oz as religious allegory" and got a full page of hits. On the other hand "wizard of oz as allegory for money and politics" also pulled up another page of hits related to - depending on who wrote it - rising populism, terrifying federalism, or post depression era monetary policy.

But I'm not here to talk about the movie, though that might be fun. What kind of metaphor might we make of the flying monkeys? But it's curtains for today. Not the ones that hang in front of our windows, but the kind that Toto pulled back at the edge. The kind of curtain that hides something, well, actually, our window curtains do that too.

But the curtain Toto pulled back was hiding something mysterious, something that the tin man, the lion, the scarecrow and Dorothy all thought they needed. Of course the gang didn't know the little wizard was behind the curtain, they thought he was right there in front of them. It was only when Toto pulled the curtain back did they glimpse, and then understand, the real situation. Toto revealed their present illusion, and the reality behind the curtain.

That's the kind of curtain I want to explore today, because I think (and I apologize if I'm projecting here, and none of this applies to you) that we, people in general, certainly me, live much of our lives behind a curtain. The curtain might be made of light gossamer or the heaviest dark velvet, and it might vary from person to person and from time to time, but I think it's still there. And I also think there is something worthwhile to see behind the curtain, such that if we can't take up office space behind the curtain like the wizard, we can at least take a peak once in a while.

Of course the idea that the world can be seen more clearly, that our day to day view or existence of the world can be transcended, that we can see or experience the "real" reality is certainly not new to this group. It comes up often, but it's something that I connect with, and have for many years. So in keeping with our theme this year, you'll get a uniquely Bill Bradshaw spin on the idea. It'll be pretty darned personal

actually. So while I sincerely hope you take something of value away with you this morning, I do recognize, as many others who've put together presentations for our fellowship, that I may very well be the primary beneficiary. There is nothing quite like telling people what you believe, to sharpen, solidify, and clarify your thoughts. Or create confusion.

Anyway, this morning, I'll be talking about how and why I think about the idea of transcendence (and here I have to admit my notion of transcendence is very likely not technically, philosophically, or theologically correct; it's just what I think best captures my beliefs and thoughts - and probably not unlike the use of the word god that we've discussed; it can cause some confusion). But I'll also share some questions I have about the idea, and also share how and why this whole curtain thing is important to me. Let me start with the curtain and a few looks behind it.

Body

Fog as curtain

Lots of things people have presented and discussed in our Fellowship have resonated and stuck with me over the years. And one of those is the derivation and description of our curtains. Although in this case it's actually described as fog; fog as a curtain works for me, and Don Miguel Ruiz probably gave me as good a conceptual framework as anybody. I have to thank Phil for introducing me to that book. It's simple and seems about right to me. In his book "The 4 Agreements" he talks about the internal beliefs, chatter, and perceptions, that ultimately drive what we do and define our relationships with others.

He talks about the "Dream of Humans" that keeps us from realizing we are all "light perceiving light", we are god and the same, and we are the light of stars (you'll have to read the book). He describes the Dreams at all levels; the world, a country, a state, a region, a culture, a family, individuals; all projecting their own dreams onto each other from birth to death.

Eventually, the dreams are accepted, and eventually they obscure who we are, alter who we might have become, and drive how we live, how we think, and how we see the world. In short, our cultural being.

We might agree that we aren't as smart as others, or that we are better than others. We might agree that certain events are ok because that's just the way life is and has to be, or agree that we can never do something so why try. We might agree that we are special, or insignificant, or deserving, or undeserving. We might agree to not notice the natural world, or to care for it exclusively. Some people get nice dreams, and others end up with nightmares, but dreams all the same.

The incessant chattering dream is called MITOTE by the Toltecs and is what separates us from reality. It's the "CURTAIN" that keeps us from REALITY, and The Dream, the fog, the smoky mirror, or in my parlance, the curtain, is drawn in front of us at birth. So I think there is a curtain. But I also believe I've peeked under it, or behind it. Or around it, or through it. It's not all that clear really what I've done.

Empathic listening

Empathy is the ability to project oneself into the personality of another person in order to better understand that person's emotions or feelings. Which in other words is transcending yourself and intimately understanding or feeling another person's perspective. I was first made aware of how this idea is important from Steven Covey, and more recently from the exercise Leila led us in.

Mary was my partner in this exercise and I spoke with her about it afterwards. For a brief moment I really felt something pretty cool. I don't know that I really saw through Mary's eyes necessarily, but I really did feel a sense of getting out of my little world for a moment, I felt a real commonality and connection with Mary... a very extraordinary, momentary sense of her. We weren't even speaking, simply looking at each other, but it seemed to go from looking, to seeing. So was this a peek behind the curtain?

If it was, some other experiences make me think I've maybe gotten some clearer or longer looks.

Epiphany, Moments of clarity

Epiphanies, or in AA parlance, moments of clarity are when you suddenly get a deep understanding of some truth that's been out of reach for you. When your vision becomes unclouded and focused by a mad rush of revelation.

My own experience with this occurred some years ago when it was pointed out how my poor behavior was affecting people. In an instant, I recognized the truth of the observation, and knew immediately that I could and would change. There was no ambiguity at all. There was no chattering brain to argue this or that, no hesitancy while considering options. It was simply a recognition of a different reality. One that I hadn't seen before, and when I saw it, it was so clear and unmistakable. It instantaneously became the way the world was, and I couldn't imagine another view at that point. It certainly seemed transcendent. It was also very important, as my life was essentially different after that.

The big one

If the first two examples were in fact some sort of real, albeit minor transcendent peek at something, the next one is by comparison, more like both curtains thrown back to show the beautifully lit stage. Before I go on though I have to make it clear that the experience I'm going to describe is about a "FRIEND", and though all applicable statutes of limitations must surely have passed, we'll call him "BOB" just to be safe. I'm also not advocating BOB's experience as appropriate for anyone else. Also, because I know BOB's story so well, I might occasionally slip into first person singular while telling the story. Just remember it's BOB.

So where in the heck are we going with this? I want to talk for a bit about the Entheogenic, or psychedelic experience. Don't laugh, I'm dead serious. And please don't be offended or frightened. Actually, given the meaning of both words, I'm surprised we haven't talked about them before. How aligned might words that mean "soul-manifesting" (psychedelic) or "generating the divine within" (Entheogen) be with ideas of spiritual growth?

The term psychedelic refers to an experience, while an entheogen is any psychoactive substance used in a religious, shamanic, or spiritual context. Of course entheogens have been used in a ritualized context for thousands of years and their religious significance is well established in anthropological and modern records. The series written by Carlos Castaneda about a southwest tribal medicine man who helps people learn to "see" with the help of peyote, might be the most popular recent writing on the subject. Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World*, also wrote *The Doors of Perception* in 1954, in which he described his entheogenic experience. Interestingly, he opened the book with a quote from the poet William Blake, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite". Perhaps by way of lending credence to the idea of entheogenic experiences as a legitimate spiritual path, I'll mention the double blind experiment conducted by a graduate student in theology at the Harvard Divinity School.

In at least some cases, those who received the niacin initially believed they had received the psychoactive drug. However, the feeling of face flushing (turning red, feeling hot and tingly) produced by niacin subsided over the first hour or so. Meanwhile, the effects of the psilocybin intensified over the first few hours. Almost all of the members of the experimental group reported experiencing profound religious experiences.

In 2006, a more rigorously controlled version of this experiment was conducted at Johns Hopkins University yielding very similar results with more than half of 36 volunteers said the experience was among the most significant of their lives. typically described as a "sense of unity" — in which the confusion of the world and of competing value systems came together in a coherent whole. These were not described in recreational terms, but as profoundly meaningful spiritual events. Or as the author noted, " "These appear to be life-altering experiences that have much in common with classical mystical experiences described throughout the ages."

Whew, that's quite a bit of background, but I'm feeling a little insecure over what's about to happen. I really wanted to establish the context of spritual discovery that Bob's story takes place. Ok, now forget Bob. Bob doesn't exist. It was me.

Some 40 years ago, I had an entheogenic experience that has stayed with me all these years. That kind of experience has been described as "the striking perception of aspects of one's mind previously unknown, or by the creative exuberance of the mind liberated from its ostensibly ordinary fetters". Some people are said to experience changes in mental operation defining their self identity different enough from their previous normal state that it can excite feelings of newly formed understanding, including revelation and enlightenment.

Yep, that about sums it up. I recall a tremendous sense of well being and calm. I felt a euphoric sense of connectedness and felt that everything was completely as it should be. I sensed, not understood, something majestic, wonderful, and mysterious. I remember saying not to my friends, but simply saying it as I experienced it, "this is incredible". That memory has stayed with me, and I believe it changed the way I view the world and my place in it. It seemed like an amazing peek at something.

I always enjoy the connections and common threads that run through our fellowship. I love it that we recognize the commonalities of the great religions, and when seemingly unrelated things, turn out to be just the opposite, and are related very nicely. The way I think of the transcendent moments (if that's even the right term) that I spoke of, related in some very pleasant ways recently. When Victor discussed Paul Tillilch and the idea of "ultimate reality" I found myself thinking that maybe I had some glimpse of understanding, that maybe I was at least on the right page. And when at a recent Alternate Sunday, someone brought up the idea that our principle urging respect for the independent web of life was about more than saving the planet, I couldn't help but think of what Victor had presented to us, and I couldn't help thinking of my feelings from 40 years ago. Somehow it all seems related, and comforting.

Questions

So there it is. A short description of my experiences looking behind the curtain. While I've enjoyed talking about the curtain, and am glad for the experiences, some questions arose as I thought about this that I can't answer. They sort of bug me. Maybe someone can shed some light on them.

Are all three of my experiences part of the same thing? I'd like to think so, but how would one know? Are empathic communication or epiphanies a subset of my experience of 40 years ago?

Are they even "real" experiences? Perhaps I've convinced myself they are meaningful, but what if they are just mind tricks. Self indulgent ramblings and rationalizations. I can dismiss other peoples important beliefs about religion and spirituality. Why are mine any better?

Can someone live behind the curtain in a heightened sense of reality, or should that really be a goal? Or would that preclude any connection with "ordinary" reality?

Was my Entheogenic experience cheating? It's been said that meditation can induce psychedelic experiences, but it seems harder to get to that point by meditating. Are the end results the same or something completely different?

Sigh. Questions, questions, always questions. I bet there are more. It looks like I'll be a UU for a while.

Conclusion

So I talked about fog and curtains, and a few examples of what I thought it meant to look past them....sometimes briefly, and once very powerfully. I talked a little I think about these experiences and how I believe they affect me, and I shared a few questions about what I believe.

What does it all mean? I dunno. I'm a UU for gosh sakes. If I really thought I knew what it all meant, I'd be something else, right? But I'll take a stab at it

If it's anything, this is my faith. It's what I believe, and like any other faith, it's improvable, ultimately it's really no different than the faith of someone who believes strongly in a personal god that directs their lives. We all choose what we believe. I believe there is an unknowable "something" out there, beyond ourselves, that we are part of.

So I choose to believe I'm part of something tremendous, inexplicable, unfathomable, incredible in every infinite way, big and small. I share existence with everything alive, and all that's inanimate. In the unimaginable vastness of time and space and all of the infinite possibilities, I'm incredibly irrelevant. Yet I sense I'm exactly where I should be in all of it, and frankly, I can't tell you how happy I am to be here. Everything is exactly as it has to be and I influence almost none of it. I take comfort knowing the rules are the same for all of creation, me, the elk, rats, rocks, stars, each of us, all of it. I believe existence is without judgment, though people aren't. And best of all, maybe the biggest mystery of all, is that I'm here now, and able to share a journey with my family and friends, at least for a short while. How amazing is that? I don't know what could be better.

And like any other personal belief, if I believe it, then it's real and valuable to me. It may not resonate with anyone else, maybe I didn't articulate it, but if it somehow helps me feel comfortable with the "Big Questions", then it's valuable. If it helps me relate to others in a more positive or honest way, then it's valuable.

In the end, maybe some of us share some of these ideas. If so, I hope you've gotten something useful from this morning. And if not, well, I guess I'll say hi to Bob for you.

End