

# Personal Renaissance and Angst – Can the “Centre Hold”?

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December 7, 2003

## Introduction

Perspective has become one of the most valuable things in my life. The more information to which I have access, the broader my perspective and the better the decisions I seem able to make. However, a change in perspective produces stress. The purpose of this essay is to explore the relationship between the healthy perspective broadening process and the difficulties this process sometimes creates for individuals and groups within society.

## The Renaissance

There are a variety of ways to improve perspective. They all require learning. Perhaps the greatest example of humanity's ability to change its perspective is the Renaissance, which was the move from a perspective limited by religion's absolute knowledge to science's uncertain, continually progressing knowledge. As the Nobel Prize winning physicist Richard Feynman notes, until we can admit that we do not know and begin to ask questions, we cannot learn. And the nature of the questions we ask will determine what we learn.

During the Middle or Dark Ages, certainty reigned respecting many aspects of the nature of the physical world surrounding us. That certainty was based on religious belief. To the extent that there was uncertainty, it mostly related to reconciling inconsistencies between various “primordial truths” posited by Christianity. Hence, the questions asked tended to relate to such useful and interesting concepts as the nature of angels and hence how many of them could dance on the head of a pin; how an all good, all powerful god could permit evil; and the complex relationship between the various members of the godhead, as well as the metaphysics of being everywhere and nowhere at once. The best minds in the world attempted to answer those questions, and produced reams of what now appears to be patently silly information as a result.

One author describes mankind's passage through the Dark Ages into the Renaissance as follows:

Edward Gibbon, in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, identified two reasons for the fall of the ancient civilization that he admired so much. He called them barbarism and religion. By barbarism he meant not only the barbarian invasions, but also the deep changes in Roman life brought on by the presence of barbarians, first outside the state but impinging on it, later within the very citadels of Roman power. By religion he of course meant Christianity. The suggestion shocked Gibbon's 18th century

readers, but it was not new. (Charles Van Doren, "A History of Knowledge", p. 92)

Socrates, in his ancient fable the City of Pigs, had proclaimed that the greatest pleasure of the citizens of his simple community was to recline on beds of myrtle and to praise the gods. The Christians of the Dark Ages also felt that the greatest of human pleasures was to praise the Creator, in all the ways that could be found to praise him. Simple meals, a simple life, time to contemplate eternity, and a voice free to praise God – what more could man want?

From our modern point of view, those centuries that we still call dark were the nadir of Western civilization. Our ancestors did not feel that way about their time. (Charles Van Doren, "A History of Knowledge", pp. 96-97)

Like any utopia, what the Middle Ages had attempted was a noble experiment, but one that human beings were not equipped to make succeed. One can only wonder that the theocratic state, based on divine harmony and the peace of God, lasted as long as it did. The experiment was undertaken at a rare moment in human history which may never come again, short of another cataclysm like the fall of the Roman Empire. But the memory of that great, failed experiment, based on the assumption that God ruled the world for the real and continuing benefit of mankind, haunts us to this day. Some, perhaps many, are almost seduced by the temptation to try the experiment again. (Charles Van Doren, "A History of Knowledge", pp. 125-126)

We began this chapter by asking what great concept was reborn in the Renaissance. The answer: the ancient idea that man is the focus of human concern. As Protagoras said twenty-five centuries ago, man is the measure of all things. ...

For a thousand years since the fall of Rome, men and women had turned over responsibility for their moral lives to surrogates of God on earth: the pope at Rome, his bishops, their parish priests or ministers. They had done this for very good reasons, primarily because they were convinced that if they did they would win salvation and eternal bliss.

Perhaps to their surprise, they discovered that the ancient Greeks and Romans, whom they admired for so many things, had by and large made no such bargain. The Romans especially had believed in God and tried to lead upright, moral lives, but they had accepted responsibility for the choice of how they lived. That responsibility had apparently been, in their estimation, inalienable.

The more the Renaissance pondered this belief, the more striking and courageous it seemed. Classical man had been responsible for himself, and had accepted the consequences of his errors if he made them. The

risk he took proved great, as the Renaissance realized. Could the reward be equally great?

Renaissance men, and women, too, decided it was, and this became the most important reason for their collective decision to discard the theocratic state and replace it with a secular state and society for which they would henceforth take complete responsibility. They would depend on religious advisers for counsel, but not for leadership. We moderns inherit their decision and, with a very few exceptions (see Chapter 12), have adhered to this belief ever since. (Charles Van Doren, "A History of Knowledge", pp. 166-167)

### **Perspective, Choice and Stress**

As noted above, most perspectival changes of significance are stressful. Joseph Campbell nicely describes this phenomenon when he relates the experience of an anthropologist who leads a group of pygmies for the first time in their lives out of the jungle and onto the plains. Having been surrounded throughout their lives by trees and foliage, and seldom having to judge distances of more than 50 yards, they could not understand what they saw outside the forest. Animals grazing on the grasslands 500 yards away were thought to be miniatures. The open space and vault of heaven frightened them – they had no frame of reference within which to interpret it. On the other hand, I know people who have been raised on the prairies who do not like going to the coastal forests because they feel claustrophobic while surrounded by mountains and trees that shut out their view of the horizon, even though they understand exactly what all of that means.

And then there are the famous psychologists' experiments with baby cats who are raised from birth for several weeks in a room without vertical lines, and when released into a "normal" environment walk into table legs and other things that exist in the vertical plane. They have not learned to see things in that plane, and so for them such things do not exist until bumped into. Those of us who were raised to think in magical terms have a similar experience with certain aspects of "real" life. The amazing thing in our case is that not only are we not able to see the table legs around us, but we interpret the continual bangs and bruises we experience as a result of our blindness so as not to realize that we are blind. For example, we have been taught to believe that the things we bump into are obstacles either placed by Satan to torment us, or God to test us, and so our magical thinking explains those bumps and bruises and for as long as that continues our experience does not teach us about the reality of our environment.

Campbell describes the psychology of perspective change when he says the following in reference to a dream in which the dreamer was warned away from something that seemed risky:

This is the dream that brings out the sense of the first, or protective, aspect of the threshold guardian. One had better not challenge the

watcher of the established bounds. And yet – it is only by advancing beyond those bounds, provoking the destructive other aspect of the same power, that the individual passes, either alive or in death, into a new zone of experience. ... The adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown; the powers that watch at the boundary are dangerous; to deal with them is risky; yet to anyone with competence and courage the danger fades. (Joseph Campbell, “The Hero With A Thousand Faces”, p. 82)

A perspective change, or personal renaissance, requires those who experience it to pass beyond frightening borders. And given the dramatic nature of the perspectival change caused by collective and personal renaissance, it should not be surprising that experience of this type causes great stress.

The Renaissance was not so much an event as a massive attitudinal change; a paradigm shift; a commitment to continual learning about reality as it is instead of as god’s self appointed representatives say it is. And perspective changes as we learn more about reality. Each generation since the Renaissance had suffered from stress as society has advanced and perspective changed apace. As Yeats famously put it:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falconer cannot hear the falcon;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world;  
The blood dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

It is not surprising that many of the artists of each age, being among society’s most sensitive and observant, acutely feel this stress and communicate it through their work. They are, to an extent, an early warning system – society’s nerve centre. Many among us are not sufficiently aware, due to lack of information or perceptive capacity, to feel much if any of what the artist feels. Today is no different in some ways than any post Renaissance time – our perspective is changing and as a result an increasing number of us feel stressed.

As we learn more about ourselves and our world, we continue to gain power to control our destinies through the possession of greater collective financial and other resources, the ability to extend and shape our lives intellectually (through unprecedented access to information), psychologically (through the use of chemicals such as Prozac, etc.), physically (through unprecedented access to medical care, despite many protests to the contrary) and even genetically. And, we have more control over our time than ever before since we do not need to work as much as we once did. That is, we are accumulating more freedom to choose, as the philosopher Daniel Dennett points out in his book “Freedom Evolves”. Ironically, however, in many parts of the developed world the recent

trend has been toward spending more time at work and less in leisure; depression affects more people than ever since statistics of this type have been kept; and many feel less personal power as they wonder what we, and life, mean in light of the steady stream of new and often disturbing information to which we have access.

Our wonderful recent innovations and the power to choose that they create come to us as a result of what we have learned about the nature of physical reality. They are the fruit of a massive tide of knowledge on which our society rises, and which is changing our perspective in ways that take our breath away as much as did the realization that the earth was not flat nor at the center of the universe must have for many of our ancestors. We have been, yet again, dragged out of the forest onto the plains, and perhaps even up onto a mountain peak, where we can see unimaginable things. Nothing in our prior experience has prepared us for the view.

For those raised inside any of the many magic kingdoms that still dominate our planet, the initial paradigm shift is dramatic enough as the walls of illogic come tumbling down. After recovering from the shock of that transition, the traveler is prepared to settle comfortably into a world governed by reason and the reality toward which it points. And then those walls tumble as well.

What does it mean about mankind and our perception of reality that matter at its most basic level is inherently uncertain, as Heisenberg and others seem to have demonstrated beyond doubt? Do we exist as we think we do, or not? Maybe Descartes', "I think, therefore I am" is not enough. The same kind of question can be asked in light of the possibility that our "reality" is one of many alternative realities, and that each tiny bit of our world and us has corresponding mirror images or other related bits in other dimensions. This is accepted by many (if not the majority of) reputable physicists as the most accurate description of "reality" we can muster at the moment based on all available evidence.

What of our ability to make choices - that most quintessential aspect of the rational man? A majority of the most rational people who I have read and with whom I have discussed this point during the past few months assure me that our choices are illusory - we are "determined" in the sense that all of our actions are the product of either genetics or conditioning and other environmental factors. We think we choose, and to maintain mental health need to continue to have this self-perception, but in fact we are driven inexorably to our choices. Hence, we do not have "free will" in the sense most of us think we do.

And as we learn about the mechanisms of which human beings are comprised and become able to manipulate them chemically, and even genetically, it seems logical to wonder what it means to be an individual. Who am "I" if "my" basic nature can be so easily and permanently changed by other human beings? I seem like a car that can be repaired, upgraded, degraded or completely changed at either my own whim or upon the decision of others over whom I may have no influence. Any one of the close to 10% of the adult population of North America

who has felt sufficient concern about their mental health to consult a psychiatrist has likely wondered in particular about this.

So with Yeats, the few who think about these things wonder what will become of us and the world we think we know. Many who don't consciously consider such matters are subconsciously troubled since our mind tends to shield us from ideas that are too difficult to bear while it wrestles with them nonetheless. And there are of course many who are locked in an information void created by religious or other leaders who have decided that for the "good" of their followers, certain aspects of reality are best unknown.

### **Mythos v. Logos**

Karen Armstrong and others have said that what I have just described is the relatively recent conflict between logos and mythos. Logos is the scientific way of learning about and perceiving reality. It asks, "can this idea be falsified, and if so, has it yet been falsified?", and only if the answer is "yes" to the first part and "no" to the second will the idea be accepted as worthy of our respect and use. Logos, hence, is well suited to tell us how things work, and hence what to do if we want to accomplish some physical task. However, it does not provide the "whys" of life – those broad frameworks within which life is lived – life's mythos; its values.

Many of the ancient "whys" posited "hows" (that is, causal relationships and/or historical facts) that have been savaged by logos, as they should have been. Skin color has nothing to do with sin; homosexuality is often a matter of genetics instead of choice, and does not per se mark a human being as deficient; kings do not have the divine right to rule over all; men do not have the divine right to rule over women; etc. It is a long list.

And so the old mythoi have fallen or are under great pressure, leaving a void of meaning in many lives. Karen Armstrong in her book "The Battle for God" makes the case that the recent rise in the popularity of fundamentalist religion is a reaction to the phenomenon just described, and I agree with her. And beyond any particular old mythos is a world of seeming great uncertainty - it is the dark forest that terrifies most of those who have ventured to its edge.

### **The Retreat to Fundamentalism**

Many perceive the stress caused by the radically changing perspective of our day to be a sign that the "centre cannot hold", and that a retreat to the safety of the old mythos (whatever it might have been in the culture in question) is required. This process is aided and abetted by religious leaders whose personal influence waxes and wanes with the fortunes of institutional religion. In some cases their payoff is in monetary terms; in others, by way of stature and influence only. And anyone who thinks that stature and influence on their own are insufficient motivators knows nothing of politics and has not been on the

receiving end of the kind of adulation and deference that even relatively low level religious leadership creates.

Those who seek to advance the fortunes of institutional religion or other forms of the old mythos must stem the tide of information and knowledge to the extent possible, lest it create sufficient perspective that the people begin to question the authority of their religious leaders. Hence, we have everything from the Islamic Jihad to Mormon “faithful history” as religious leaders seize upon, and magnify, the uncertainties of the times to persuade their followers that security and happiness can only be found by shutting out those aspects of modernity that conflict with “the” divine view of reality. In some cases, such as the Taliban, this requires that most aspects of the modern world be shut out. Others, such as the Mormons, try to ride both horses by being “in the world, but not of the world”, which means accepting and using the benefits of modernity while trying to shut out those aspects of the information produced by science and other academic disciplines that contradict “the” divine view. This model worked better (from the perspective of institutional religious leaders) in the pre-Internet days that it will from now on.

Fundamentalist religious leaders attempt to convince their followers that it is too risky to trust the “arm of flesh”, and hence that man should continue to surrender much of his decision making capacity to religious leaders, as was typically the case during the Dark Ages. My personal renaissance occurred when I realized that I had, on the basis of mostly innocent misrepresentations made by well intentioned people whom I was taught to trust, surrendered too much of my decision making capacity to my religious leaders. As a result of this realization, I decided that my arm of flesh is better than the arm of god, because what is passed off for god’s arm is just another arm of flesh. And worst of all, god’s fleshy arm represents institutional interests that are concerned with many things other than what is best for those I love and for me. I am far better off trusting my own imperfect, self-interested arm of flesh instead of the arms of god’s self-appointed, self-interested representatives. And I note that the nature of the conditioning to which I was subjected and the limited perspective my religious beliefs created made each of these realizations difficult. In fact, until my perspective was radically changed by ingesting large volumes of information primarily respecting the limited nature of my religious worldview and how human psychology and sociology works relative to religion, it was impossible for me to come to the conclusions I eventually reached.

My personal renaissance put me in a position to feel for the first time in my life the existential angst of which Yeats writes, as well as all kinds of wonderful emotions. It was as if I had emerged from anesthesia.

### **Will the Centre Hold?**

So, where does all of this leave us? Will the centre hold? Should we retreat to the security of traditional religious belief to ensure that it will? Will society do so whether it should or not?

To address these questions, it may help to draw on some of the good ideas buried in our largely rejected traditional mythos. Yeats above refers to a descent into anarchy. Many others use the term chaos to refer to the same thing. Campbell above called it the unknown.

As Campbell and others have pointed out, the descent into chaos defines the hero's quest, which is the psychological process of collective and individual rebirth. If we work through what we fear, we almost always find wonderful new life on the other side. This is the Arthurian knight errant going into the forest on his quest; Frodo accepting the role as ring bearer; Gandalf turning back to fight the Balrog, that most ancient of massive, frightening creatures; Neo blindly captaining his ship toward the city of the machines at the conclusion of the Matrix trilogy; Buddha confronting the demons that we now understand represented the forces fear and desire; Christ accepting his father's cup, and then dying on the cross; etc. In each case, as a result of the restructuring forces of chaos, new, stronger life emerges. This process is repeated at the biological, social and cultural levels of our existence in so many ways that we can't begin to count them. And as it requires that we venture, or be thrust into, the unknown, it is terrifying. As Yeats also puts it, evoking religious imagery to make a universal point respecting the unnerving nature of the reordering principle within seeming chaos:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born.

The message throughout the ages and lesson of history have been the same – submit to chaos and you will come out better on the other side; do not fear either knowledge or the future; and do not cling to the past for its sake alone, but consider all things on their merits. History also illustrates that the alternative to submitting to chaos is not the refusal to submit, but rather a refusal to acknowledge the problem. A Pink Floyd put it, many live “comfortably numb”. On this, and the cognitive dissonance it breeds beneath the surface, religious fundamentalism feeds.

So I conclude that not only will the centre hold, but that we will gradually emerge into a new understanding of our humanity that will be as wonderful and presently unimaginable as the forest we approach seems dark. And our progeny will look back on our current stumblings with the same sort of bemusement with which we treat Columbus' blustering, miscalculated thrust toward the Spice Islands that resulted in his discovery of America. As it turns out, he could not even read his own navigational instruments. But the Americas were just too damn big for him to miss, given the direction in which he struck out. It seems to me that we are in much the same position. All we need is the courage to push into the darkness. And we have much better evidence and reason to do so than did Columbus.

Our collective centre has been under more stress recently than it has been in a long time as evidenced by the rise of fundamentalist religious belief. In effect, we



have experienced such a radical paradigm shift that the resulting stress has driven us part way back toward the mentality that characterized the Middle Ages, which was caused by the Roman Empire's fall and the systemic shock that produced it. Ironically, the pace of knowledge growth itself that we experience appears to be our shock, and those parts of the world that have been most affected are those where religion was the strongest when radically new perspectives rocked our collective system. This is the result of a classic power struggle, and also indicates where the new perspectives have caused the most stress. The folks in Sweden, for example, seem to be making out just fine.

Power has always largely resided in the ability to access information, to communicate, and to form relationships with those who have similar interests. Gutenberg in some ways created democracy by facilitating each of these things. The Internet will cause information to become available in the same kind of exponentially more powerful way as did the printing press. Hence, we will see a further erosion in the power of all those who depended upon information control to maintain power as the unwashed masses learn about many things.

Institutional religion is mostly about power. Those in power are always defensive. The stress caused by our ongoing paradigm shift has strengthened their hand by making the certainty they offer seem more attractive. This is the most commonly offered and accepted Faustian bargain of all time – certainty and mental comfort in exchange for limited freedom. Hitler, Stalin and countless others in large and small ways have exploited this human frailty. However, the fundamentalist tide seems to have crested for the time being. And, I agree with the many who indicate that that the Internet will create a paradigm shift rivaling that of the printing press itself. Information is being democratized as never before, and other forms of democracy will surely follow. This will, as noted above, reduce the power of religious and other leaders who depend upon information control to maintain power. This, combined with mankind's gradual accustoming to our current perspective and built in drive to continue to learn and achieve, will eventually result in the creation of a new mythos that is suited to our times, and encourages continued learning and use of knowledge. Many of the values that underpinned the old mythos will continue to be useful. I expect to spend the rest of my life watching with fascination and pleasure as our new mythos emerges.

Humanity is slowly growing up. Perhaps we are past the learning to walk stage now. Feynman is not sure if we are there yet. He talks of our infancy.

The Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel noted long ago "The Insecurity of Freedom" (see the excellent book by that title). And Daniel Dennett recently added the insight that "Freedom Evolves" (see the provocative book by that title). As we accustom ourselves to each new degree of evolving freedom, our capacity to learn produces more. This process has to one extent or another always been part of human progress, and I do not expect that to change.

## Conclusion

My personal renaissance can perhaps be taken as a microcosm for modern society's continuing renaissance, or vice versa. I was initially anaesthetized and hence felt little. As I learned about my religious faith and the world in general, it became clear that things were not as certain as I had been led to believe, and so I feared – feared that my centre would not hold and that I would descend into chaos. This fear motivated learning and so I ingested massive amounts of information and began to construct a new world with a more stable centre. At first it seemed that the centre of my old world did not hold. But I now see that it was reinvented, reinforced and finally moved to a better place on more solid foundations. All the while perspective changing information continued to be digested and I went through a passage from old to new that was both painful and wondrous. While doing this I came to understand the concept of the descent into chaos, and the rebirth that follows if we allow the process of “undeception” (See Hans-Georg Gadamer <http://www3.telus.net/public/rcmccue/bob/documents/undeception.pdf> at page 2) to work its uncomfortable, even terrifying, magic on us.

I observe that in most cases, our minds only permit us to understand as much information as we can handle. The few for whom this protective mechanism fails go mad. I felt a tug or two in that direction during the climax of my rebirth pangs. But, I stayed with my centre as it moved, rebirth followed and my world is now more and better than it has ever been. I expect the same for most of my fellow travelers.

The lesson of the Renaissance and countless other chapters of human history is that fear of the unknown yields most often to wonder and delight as understanding illuminates the dark.