

2016 U3A Course based on

Dancing With the Unknown

A Book about FEELINGS and the Everyday Experience of MIND and SOUL

Session 13 – September 12, 2016

This is the final session for Term 3 so it will include some more revision of what has led us up to this point and we will take a look at the kind of mental **suffering** that is, unfortunately, part of our everyday experience. We don't need to dwell too long on this and there are some interesting new topics coming up in Term 4, but we cannot ignore the reality that being human is sometimes very painful and we suffer and, of course, our mind is at the centre of this experience.

Last time we finished up speaking about **pride** and **shame** that live together in our minds as a result of what I called Too Much Self. I had mentioned earlier that I thought my own feelings of shame were a major obstacle to my wellbeing during that dark period of my life. In this Course I am drawing on my own life experience to some extent, which I describe in a very general sense as a journey from self towards soul, but mainly I am trying to explain certain principles about how our minds do what they do. It's a very large and complicated subject so I can only mention certain aspects of it – those that I think are the most important – but, hopefully, they are also aspects that you can relate to personally from your own experience. I know that some of you have been through a lot in your lives. So this is a brief overview of what we have done.

We started off with the basic biology from Humberto Maturana that leads to the idea that our mind is for **being and belonging**. It enables us to be an individual and to be involved in the world around us – to have both the autonomy and connectedness that are required for us to be alive. That's what aliveness is – being someone and being connected to other things around us so that we feel we belong. We couldn't **be** if we weren't properly connected. Our self-esteem depends on our relationships and vice versa. I had problems in both those areas earlier in my life and the main lesson I learned was that the answers lay outside my preoccupation with myself in isolation and they involved something more than just my scientific thinking. In the end it was relationship that healed me – with other people, with myself and with the unknown. This is sound biological science with another layer added to it that I call spirituality. From this we get a basic definition of **love**, which is the kind of relationship in which the individual is also strengthened. It is also a yearning that can never quite be fulfilled. Life is stressful at all times.

Secondly, Stephen Porges showed us that we have three levels of stress response. These are a kind of freeze, which is the most primitive, a kind of fight-or-flight, which was designed for pre-human animals and, thirdly, a social engagement system that we call love. We are basically fearful, but we also have a ventral vagus system that enables us to trust and to hug one another anyway and this is how we deal with stress. The idea of love introduces mystery and strengthens our relationship with the unknown from which our sense of wonder and appreciation of beauty can grow. This takes us further beyond the preoccupation with self into a realm of mind that I call **soul**. I can't talk about soul scientifically, but I said I believe in it as the unknown source of love.

Thirdly, Jaak Panksepp came to the conclusion that certain emotions (that he called seeking, fear, anger, grief, lust, care and play) are instinctual and fundamental. They are the framework around which our mind develops and operates so we need them. From these we develop many variations

and learned emotional responses as we go through life, which we find useful, but which can also contribute to our suffering. We add feelings and thoughts and make meaning, which is partly in our story and partly subconscious. This is the way our being and belonging actually creates each new moment of our experience. Life doesn't happen to us – we live it. We do this by deciding where to direct our **attention**. We only attend to the parts of our world that interest us at that time and we create our world around that.

Finally, Iain McGilchrist adds the perspective we need to understand this process of attention. He came to the conclusion that the two hemispheres of our brain contribute differently to the kind of world that we create. It's not that one side is for speaking and the other is for drawing or any simple distribution of labour like that – we need both for doing anything. It's that we essentially have two brains that enable us to see different things about our world. They work together, but they temper one another and restrain one another to some extent and guide one another because we need these two different ways of attending to the world. One enables us to focus sharply on the mechanics of our involvement in the world and the other enables us to appreciate our relationship with the world as a whole. The way I put it last week was an enormous generalisation that I'm not sure Iain would be happy with – but I think he would agree with, in principle – that we choose how much **self** and how much **soul** there will be in our world. This Course about the principles on which our mind is based parallels to some extent my own journey of recovery from self towards soul.

So we come to the subject of *suffering*, which is Chapter 15 in my book, and ask ourselves how could those principles of mind help us to learn something useful about an aspect of our experience that is extremely baffling. I don't think anyone understands suffering or pain very well. I studied pain in some detail when I was researching stress in animals and in recent years I have attended lectures and read books by some of the leading pain researchers. This is partly because my wife has a medical condition that includes chronic pain – not constant, but very debilitating at times. Suffering is an enigma partly because we expect our mind to help us with it and keep it to a minimum, but we also find that our mind is contributing to it and this is difficult to manage.

The extent to which some people can endure physical pain and suffering without much complaint is another of the natural wonders of the mind that we don't understand. At the other extreme are people who are so sensitive that complaining is their default mindset. The egoic self that I've been talking about enjoys this because complaining, blaming and resenting are its favourite tools for shoring up and strengthening its own position. The ego would generally prefer to be right than to be at peace. This is where 'too much self' comes in to play.

McGilchrist explained that the egoic self that we emphasise by favouring our left-brain process is confident in its ability to know the answers without involving relationships or invoking the unknown whereas the emphasis from the right brain allows us to be open to new experiences that are not explicit and it feels empowered in that way, which takes us towards soul. We need both, but he pointed out that we are now creating, for the most part, a world that is more and more self-centred, narrow and self-limiting at the expense of the less precise, but more beautiful world in which loving relationships are paramount and human values are satisfied.

We do need a sense of self as part of our story, but we create a different version of our world depending on how much time and emphasis we put into self or soul. The left brain networks are especially good at re-utilising details that are already clear, which we need for the systematic processing of facts and figures and for following even quite complicated routines. This is why it is so confident that it will get the right answers – because it is self-referring and always aiming towards certainty and control, defined by its own parameters. It provides a way of being blind to what we do not know when that is a useful attitude to take. We must beware of being seduced into wanting to spend our whole lives there.

The right brain opens toward possibilities and flow rather than fixity – experiencing the world as a process that is not explicit, but in which we expect to find meaning through relationships. There is less of self here because there is more of context and the unknown. Real life does not follow precise algorithms, yet we have created a ridiculously bureaucratized and systematized, artificial reality that our ‘efficient’ left brain thinking takes more seriously than what we actually experience as reality. It’s the difference between what is written on this bit of paper (which ‘should have worked perfectly’) and what we actually feel about the situation we are in.

McGilchrist argues that there is a terrible sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction in the world generally because our mind craves for a satisfying meaning, yet we are mostly doing things we don’t really believe in – making money in technology-driven lives of joyless urgency while feeling lacking in love. This gives us a general principle about suffering that it is going to depend a lot on where we are putting our attention. The great E. F. Schumacher who wrote *Small is Beautiful* and also *A Guide for the Perplexed* challenged us to live and work together ‘as if people mattered.’ What an indictment on modern society if we are not doing this. Of course, we still find ways of doing it despite the over-designed systems that we live in.

We have trouble describing suffering adequately because, like happiness, it is such an amalgam of emotions, feelings and thoughts – a very complex state of mind. If it is to do with the way we direct our attention, then how much control do we have over this? An American doctor who specialises in palliative care, David Kessler, wrote a book called *Capture – Unravelling the Mystery of Mental Suffering* in which he described this difficulty. Certain things capture our attention so powerfully that we cannot seem to turn it elsewhere even though we want to do that. These obsessions will contribute to suffering in two ways: they prevent us from being truly present with whatever is happening now and they concentrate too much of our mind’s activity on the self rather than the soul. He says there is no switch to turn off this capture so we need to draw strength from outside of ourselves to build new connections that will replace the unfortunate capture. He acknowledges that this can be very difficult to do.

What I think is important about his work is that he sees a common mechanism for all different forms of suffering. He says that doctors try to heal suffering by treating a very specific underlying cause such as a certain chemical imbalance, but there may be a more general problem that is not addressed by this treatment and the treatment may even compound the original problem. In a later session I will be talking about how we bring about change when our attention is captured and the opportunity to re-write one’s story or add to it. We often don’t realise how unfinished we humans are at any point in our development – we think of our story as if it is finished, but of course, it is never finished and always subject to change.

The reality is that we will all experience some very bad feelings from time to time when we are sick or injured or living with pain or loss. Most of us will also have unpleasant emotional experiences such as shame, guilt, despair, jealousy, envy, resentment, contempt, cynicism, indifference and sloth, to name a few of the most common. None of these is a primary instinctual emotion, yet it is because of our emotions generally that we will encounter suffering. Martha Nussbaum pointed out in her book on the intelligence of emotions that their purpose is to reveal our inadequacies, to show our limitations and vulnerability so that we may have a more honest appreciation of the reality of our lives. They acknowledge our neediness and lack of self-sufficiency, exposing our vulnerability because there is so much that we can’t control.

She says this neediness is shrouded in our shame because we don’t want to acknowledge it. We are the only animals who wish not to be emotional and to transcend them, but know we can’t – the only animals for whom neediness is a source of shame so we take a false pride in denying our neediness. In growing up we need to learn through discomfort and frustration that neediness is okay – in fact, it is essential for the growth and development of our mind. Permitting ourselves to be needy is part of our emerging understanding of love and the letting go of our demand for

perfection. The child is a mixture of omnipotence and helplessness, but these must be seen as complementary so that either can be relaxed and accepted when it is necessary to do so. The refusal to tolerate imperfection or any attitude of intolerance towards imperfection in later life, is a serious handicap. The dominant emotion under the tyranny of perfectionism is a false pride that is accompanied by shame. As I said the lessening of shame comes from learning through relationships that we are all imperfect and this is okay.

The reason I keep coming back to the basic biology is that it reminds us that we are always overcomplicating what we expect our mind to do for us. When we forget the basic principle that our mind's purpose is to promote being and belonging we open the door to the unhelpful habits of making unnecessary judgments and trying to control things that cannot be controlled. The craving for certainty fuels our desire to control, which is probably our biggest curse. Feeling that you don't have control over your life predisposes to anxiety and depression whereas feeling that you don't *need* to have control over everything is liberating. This need to control is set in the parts of our mind that create the most noise and tell us the biggest lies and wherever there is control or the desire to control, love will be harder to find.

Interactions involving our egoic self are conspicuous in their reactivity, which we often call 'drama.' Love, empathy and compassion work because they don't fuel the drama or buy into the reactivity. We begin life with a set of primary emotions that I described earlier and these are refined and developed into our everyday emotional repertoire as a result of this reactivity that we experience in our dealings with others, especially as children, but also throughout our whole lives. It has often been recorded that a parent's emotional reactivity shows up in a child's later life.

I mentioned PTSD earlier and the way that Bessel van der Kolk and others have used the work of Stephen Porges to develop new forms of treatment that involve a more compassionate relationship with oneself and with others. PTSD is an inability to be alive in the present situation because the past trauma has hijacked the mind and interferes with the connecting that is required to live comfortably now. Given that we all probably have a minor amount of residual trauma in our lives, the same approach of focussing on relationships will help us as well. It is the soul rather than the self that enables us to have a relationship with the unknown and I have found that nothing can strengthen the relationship with oneself more than that feeling of knowing you are loved that I have been talking about in this Course.

The learned emotions that cause the most problems are those that obstruct interpersonal engagement because they are defensive in nature and work to protect ego boundaries. Shame, guilt, despair, jealousy, envy, resentment, contempt, cynicism, indifference and sloth all have this effect as well as cynicism, apathy, boredom and indifference. Disgust is an important emotion that Panksepp said bordered on being an instinctual one except that it is our cultural experience that mainly determines what sort of things we find disgusting.

The suffering of loneliness is far more widespread today than we generally acknowledge. John Cacioppo and William Patrick, in their book *Loneliness – Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, estimated that 20% of Americans were feeling sufficiently disconnected for it to be affecting their health and they found that loneliness was on a par with obesity, high blood pressure, lack of exercise and smoking as a risk factor for illness or early death. They showed that it is not just any form of social support that overcomes loneliness – there has to be shared meaning in the connection of the kind I have been talking about in this Course.

Nowadays, the two most common words in the language of everyday suffering would have to be **anxiety** and **depression**. They have gone from being regarded as background problems in our society just a few decades ago to now being worldwide epidemics. The amount of resources involved in treating anxiety and depression is so great now it is hard to believe. They always existed, of course, so we have to consider whether their impact was simply not recognised 50 years ago or it has dramatically increased with our modern lifestyle. It could be both. I brought in Scott Stossel's

best-selling book, *My Age of Anxiety*, and also Andrew Solomon's classic tome, *The Noonday Demon – An Anatomy of Depression*. Both are very readable and quite personal accounts of living with this kind of mental suffering.

The state that we call sadness is an enigma. It isn't always seen as a negative emotion even though it's an unpleasant feeling. Shakespeare described parting as 'sweet sorrow;' nostalgia is a melancholy tinged with pleasure or satisfaction. Karla McLaren, who wrote *The Language of Emotions*, sees sadness as a blessed release providing a life-giving fluidity and helping you to come to terms with reality. Christophe André, the author of *Feelings and Moods*, felt that sadness is definitely needed at times, but we shouldn't overvalue it. Its extension into despair is an immense fatigue and loss of hope, which is another dimension of suffering.

We can overvalue sadness when there is too much self and too little soul. The feeling of hope is a surprisingly inexhaustible and mysterious state of mind that draws from the unknown because it often defies the logical analysis that our left-brain thinking has applied to the situation. Emily Dickinson put it beautifully in the first verse of one of her poems:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops – at all.

A New Zealand academic, Jacky Bowring, wrote *A Field Guide to Melancholy*, which contains lots of interesting literary allusions and historical ideas about all the different shades of this 'ambivalent and contradictory' condition. In ancient times the *melancholic* (black bile) was one of four possible states of mind, the others being *choleric* (yellow bile), *phlegmatic* (phlegm) and *sanguine* (blood) named after the four basic 'humours' or life fluids. Different people had different proportions of these four elements in their makeup. The conundrum that has existed forever is: how are we to distinguish between melancholy as a mere temperament and melancholia as an illness that needs treatment? The distinction suggested by Hippocrates over 2000 years ago – which is how long the condition persists – is still a basis for diagnosis in the Psychiatrist's Manual today. The difficult question is how long is too long for a sad state to continue?

Of the seven primary emotions, the most obvious examples of suffering is grief. This is a primary emotion from which there is no escape because it stems from the loss of what we need most – a loving connection. Our strongest biological need drives us toward connections and these sustain us, but they do not last forever. Every time we lose a loved one or a friend we simply have to endure pain and sorrow for a time. This is exactly the way life is. Such is our need for social engagement that a 'broken heart' can be every bit as painful as a broken leg – in fact exactly the same brain hormones are involved and the same painkillers provide relief. I think we underestimate the need for minor grieving in situations where we change our house or our job or move to another location. We might think: I shouldn't be sad, but it is a natural healthy aspect of our mind to grieve. Like most emotions it shows up more strongly in our right hemisphere and is obviously important for our overall perspective – our appreciation of context and acceptance of the unknown.

The primary emotion of fear is sometimes blamed for causing suffering, but I think that is a distortion of its true biological function, which is to keep our mind alert. Fear is a healthy primary emotion as I've said, but most of us are not entirely comfortable with it because it often seems to overplay its hand or come to the fore when it is not really needed. Even when things are going well we are inclined to worry and the greater the desire to control the future the more intense the worry becomes. This can become what we know as anxiety, which is a learned emotional state that is different from fear itself. It is a kind of expectation of fear that we pick up and develop as we spend more and more time and energy in trying to control things that are beyond our control. Its only real antidote is greater trust in the unknown.

There was a massive increase in the diagnosis of anxiety disorders from 4% of the population in 1980 to 25% in 2010 across several countries including Australia and it has continued to increase since then. Treatments such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy have been joined by new anxiety-soothing drugs to provide some relief. Some experts suggest that the more stringent diagnostic criteria have contributed to this by including everybody who has a naturally anxious temperament in the category of the mentally ill. Allan Horwitz and Jerome Wakefield wrote *All We Have To Fear – Psychiatry's Transformation of Natural Anxiety into Mental Disorders* to explain this viewpoint. Another contributing factor could be our greater reliance on left-brain activity bringing a narrower focus, more need to control and a less confident relationship with the unknown. It is unrealistic to expect to live without some anxiety as Rollo May pointed out in *The Meaning of Anxiety*, but it is very difficult for each of us to work out how much anxiety is too much.

Our primary emotion is the instinct of seeking, which is a drive to explore and do things we haven't done before, and an essential part of this is what we call vigilance. It is obvious that other animals have vigilance and they also have fear if they are threatened, but they do not seem to have anxiety. The essential tension of being and belonging that I have described includes a sharpness and wit that is our life energy, which we have refined into an emotion we call anxiety. If we are able to welcome it in that basic form of excitement instead of exaggerating it into a debilitating, even paralysing, condition we would be able to obtain its benefits rather than its pains. The ability to accept whatever feelings we have without too much interpretation of them and to trust that they naturally become other feelings as our mind flows is the ability to live in the present that we need.

Anger is the only one of the primary emotions that shows up most strongly in the left hemisphere. It arises from a thought that something is not happening as it should be and this needs to be put right. Its basic form is to protect against the loss of your offspring or a direct attack. Whether it has any place in our emotional repertoire apart from that is highly debatable. There is no good evidence that letting off steam through anger has any physiological benefits. It can become a very destructive part of the ego's reactive repertoire.

Resentment – the re-feeling of anger – is a particularly insidious and destructive element of suffering. It is the remanence aspect of anger that comes from ruminating on it instead of moving on with your life. Occasional anger may be useful if it clears the air, but there is no such thing as a useful resentment. If angry feelings persist or arise frequently the reactivity of the egoic self is the prime culprit. Resentment is often accompanied by self-pity as it was in my case. I had difficulty letting go of bad feelings towards other people whose actions and attitudes seemed to have disadvantaged me through no fault of my own. Only when my relationship with the unknown and with myself started to improve and I was able to accept the reality of my situation instead of living in a fantasy did I start to feel better.

The learned emotion that I think of as the most subtle and severe and the most prevalent of the subconscious emotions of suffering is shame because it is the one that prevents us from knowing that we are loved. Guilt and shame may occur together, but the guilt is easier to deal with because it results from something you know you have done wrong and therefore you can at least apologise and perhaps make restitution. Shame is a self-judgment that you are not worthy so trying harder, being more successful or having lots of friends cannot remove it. The kinds of experience that lead to shame are not always obvious, which makes it harder to understand. You may not be ashamed about anything in particular. They may be things you had little control over such as an illness or the breakdown of a marriage, but you blame yourself anyway. They can be a series of the most trivial shortcomings such as forgetting friend's birthdays or arriving late for appointments, which become entrenched as normal behaviour so they validate your insidious sense of shame. Perfectionism, people-pleasing, trying to 'keep up with the Jones's' or fit into the group against your natural instinct also cultivate one's sense of shame.

Shame interferes with connectedness leading to feelings of alienation, but these are not always recognised as loneliness; they may be disguised as something else. The best antidote to shame is telling your story honestly and openly to others and listening to their stories to restore authentic connections that will allow empathy, compassion and love to flow again. The *Spirituality of Imperfection* by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham and their later book, *Experiencing Spirituality*, have lots of examples of this. Shame hates it when you tell your story – it can't cope with being shared because it thrives on being a secret, hidden part of your mind and it seems to be protecting you so you hang on to it.

I know this from my own experience. Selfish pride is the backstop for shame and for a time it prevented me from getting free from the prison that my mind had created. In this prison you are cut off from other people so you can create stories without cross-checking them and it's easy to blame the outsiders, until you realise that they don't have the key to your cell – it is on your side of the door. Your first act must be to open up after which it is the connection with other people that works the magic of social engagement and shared meaning and you can begin to let go of your suffering. Then you begin to realise that we are all the same, or very similar, in our self-conscious fears and doubts and our subconscious shame. This feeling that you are not the only one is crucial as I found in my recovery. It means that the 'false game of judgment, comparison and assumption' is no longer the only game.

Envy and jealousy are two common instruments of suffering, the former concerning things that others have that you would like, the latter stemming from the possibility of losing something that you are strongly attached to because you think someone else wants to take it away from you. These emotions affect men and women differently as was evident in an experiment to test the effects of overt flirting by a male or a female experimenter in a group of people who were supposedly waiting for the experiment to begin. When the women were being attracted by an appealing man their male partners tended to withdraw and sulk. When it was the men being attracted by a pretty girl the women tended to get closer and even hold on to their partner.

I have mentioned the pain and suffering of grief, which saps your hope and vitality for a time, but nowadays it is the clinical condition called depression, when the feeling of meaninglessness and futility takes over one's mind for a long period, that seems to have swept across the human population as a major epidemic. Bereavement used to be excluded from the diagnosis of depression, but now it has been included again because it feels very similar. The World Health Organisation says that depression is rapidly becoming the most prevalent form of suffering in the entire world! It is not confined to affluent Western society. As rapidly as the treatments for depression are being scaled up so the incidence of the problem is increasing.

Depression is so widespread and ideas about its causation are so varied and vague that it is one of the most baffling medical issues. Andrew Solomon, in his comprehensive book that is also powerfully personal, suggests that, at best, it will only ever be contained. Treatment by medication can be helpful, but is inconsistent in its results, probably because no particular chemical imbalance in the brain or body has been definitely proved to be the cause. Evidence for the role of serotonin, for example, is not clear-cut. Jonathan Rottenberg wrote *The Depths – The Evolutionary Origins of the Depression Epidemic* in which he advocates moving away from the simplistic paradigm of a chemical imbalance to look at the evolutionary development of this condition and its broader causes in modern society.

The incidence of clinical depression has at least doubled in the US and many other countries since 1980. Some research found a correlation with the loss of interpersonal cohesion (connectedness) that is especially evident in immigrant populations whose living standards have improved, but at the expense of their close family ties. Surveys of the level of happiness in different populations have never been very convincing, but their most consistent finding is that the best predictor of perceived happiness is the prevalence of close-knit small groups of individuals within that

population. Long-term studies such as the Harvard Longitudinal Study show clearly that it is the warmth and quality of the interpersonal relationships that best protects people against depression. Yet we all know of people who seem to have warm, close relationships, but are suffering from depression.

Rates of depression are increasing more rapidly in the younger members of the population and the reasons for that are not clear. Clinical depression affects many more women than men; males are more likely to deny it and deflect it with other symptoms like increased anger and irritability. There is considerable disagreement amongst the experts about whether the classification system for mental illness (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or DSM) has contributed to the over-diagnosis of depression. Allan Horwitz and Jerome Wakefield wrote *The Loss of Sadness – How Psychiatry Transformed Normal Sorrow into Depressive Illness* to debate this issue. This is an important question because people suffering from depression have many treatment options to choose from and some of the most effective such as physical exercise, yoga and mindfulness practice are quite amenable to self-management.

The pursuit of happiness may itself be a subtle cause of suffering. What Russ Harris called ‘*the happiness trap*’ is the mistaken belief that happiness is the natural default state for human beings so everyone else is presumably in that state and the fact that I’m not enjoying it right now shows that something must be wrong with me. This is another example of the value of accepting whatever feelings come along without comparing them with anybody else – trusting in the fact that they will turn into something else. This is what doesn’t happen if you are severely depressed.

In conclusion there is a very broad spectrum of suffering ranging from minor niggles to many kinds of severe pain or debilitation. Overall we have an amazing ability to cope with this, but there are also many cases when people’s minds became so overwhelmed by suffering that they lost their will to live. We cannot entirely avoid it, though we try our best to keep it to a minimum. The common thread for dealing with and healing the effects of suffering is our experience of relationships, which include loving friends, self-compassion and a love for the unknown.

What is the opposite of suffering? I described wellbeing at the beginning of the Course as the feeling of satisfaction that you have when your life seems to be acceptable to you at this point in time. I also spoke about frustration because I said that we need that experience to really know what satisfaction is like. Frustration is often difficult to identify, which can make satisfaction difficult to find. I said earlier that I think the ultimate frustration is our demand for love so the more strongly we can sense and cultivate love in our lives the more likely it is that satisfaction will be at hand.

There are so many unknowns and so much that is not crystal clear about suffering that to speak about it here reminds me of how little we really know about the our own mind.