

2016 U3A Course based on

Dancing With the Unknown

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

Session 9 – July 18, 2016

In the last session at the end of Term 2 we talked about emotions, feelings and thoughts and I introduced the idea of **seven primary emotions** without saying much about them. We ran out of time and although there was more detail given in the notes, I want to revisit that today and try to explain it better. We need to consider how it is that these seven emotions serve our mind by promoting our being and belonging and how all the other emotions that we speak about develop from them.

For the purposes of this Course I am defining the emotions as the subconscious part of our mind to try to distinguish them from our feelings, which are conscious, though not yet fully formed into thoughts. The feelings stem from the emotions in the first place, but they are also created by our senses and our thinking and they have an important role in their own right, especially with regard to our sense of meaning. I want to refer back to the beautiful words of Rumi in his poem *The Guest House* in the HANDOUT that emphasise acceptance and acknowledgment of our feelings whether we like them or not and also the words about feelings that I quoted from of e.e.cummings: 'Whenever you think, or you believe, or you know, you're a lot of other people; but the moment you feel, you're nobody-but-yourself.' In this Course I want to give feelings the credit they deserve as the best guides we have in our search for meaning.

But there is more to say about the emotions themselves and the way they combine with feelings and thoughts in our relationships with other people that I am calling social engagement. Again I am choosing to simplify greatly because so many different emotions have been named and described that it's easy to get lost in a complicated explanation of each one. That is why I will begin with the seven primary emotions as defined by Jaak Panksepp based on their biological evolution. These are shown in the HANDOUT. My aim in this Course is to use the basic biology to make the subtleties of the human mind, as we experience them, clearer and easier to understand.

These primary, instinctual emotions that we are born with are like the engine room of our mind. They are the first responses that our mind makes and they occur within our body and our brain without us realising it at first, though they soon make their presence felt in our posture, our actions, our language and our demeanour, as well as in our feelings. Everything the emotions do is in the service of our mind's primary task which is to engage with our world and maintain our individuality – to preserve the autonomy and connectedness that is not only essential for life, but provides our sense of wellbeing. We share this 'engine room' of emotions with other mammals, but the operations that happen 'above decks' in the human mind are unique and special. The range of human experiences is enormous, from extraordinary bliss to intense suffering and every aspect of our mind is involved. By equating the emotions with our subconscious mind, which is much the largest part of our mind as the diagram in the HANDOUT shows, I am saying that the emotions are the primary driving force.

I'm sure everyone is familiar with the way that very strong emotions such as rage and fear or overwhelming sadness can totally dominate your mind so that what you think and do seems to be beyond your control for the time being. Even your feelings that normally show up on the surface of the sea of emotion are swamped by the crashing waves. In the last session I used the idea of the

rider on an elephant to describe the subtle nature of working with our more powerful emotions to do the things we want to do.

Earlier I described the hormonal responses to stress that are constantly readying the body and mind for the next engagement, but the ones I mentioned are only a small part of what is happening in your subconscious mind. The ANS (autonomic nervous system) is in overdrive due to strong emotion, our heartbeat and breathing are reacting and our facial expression and attention towards other people are profoundly affected. The greatest changes are in our brain as some networks fire up and others go into limbo. What I am suggesting, for the sake of simplicity, is that all of this is our emotion. If we think about emotion as the totality of this incredibly complex physiological change that can involve every cell in our bodies, I think it helps us to understand how our minds work.

I now believe that, when my life was at its lowest ebb, in that dark period that lasted many years that I told you about in Term 1, the overwhelming emotion that held me in its grip was shame. I didn't realise that at the time – I didn't really know what shame was – and I focussed almost entirely on my thoughts about things, not my feelings or emotions. I tried to name my problem as a lack of being loved and I now believe this is what some people call core shame, perhaps the most insidious and destructive emotion of all because it is the one that directly stands in the way of knowing that you are loved. I plan to deal with the emotions of suffering in a separate session later in the Course, so we will come back to shame and consider guilt, anxiety, envy and resentment, jealousy, contempt, despair, sloth and indifference then.

My point here is that all of these are secondary emotions that we have learned during our experience of life – we were not born with them. And they do not assist with our mind's task of engaging meaningfully with our world in a way that is satisfying; they are obstacles to our engagement and our self-esteem so they harm our wellbeing. Why would we want to learn such unhelpful emotions? I think we can't help doing this – we are powerless over it because, as well as stress, we all experience some degree of **trauma**, which may be very slight or it may be harmful and severe. I am wanting to correct an omission in my earlier notes regarding the importance of stress where I failed to mention trauma. I was explaining the natural biological process whereby stress is not our enemy – it motivates us to engage wisely and shows us how to do so. And short-term stress has no long-term adverse effects if the natural biological response is adequate in every way. I emphasised the danger of allowing stress to become a prolonged experience, in which case there are adverse consequences for our health.

What I failed to say was that each response to stress does leave an impression or an imprint of some sort in the fabric of our body/mind. These imprints are a natural part of our learning process that enables us to develop the skills we need, which are built into our secondary emotions and our feeling and thinking. These marks left by stress are mostly beneficial changes in the connectivity of our brain. But when the stress is very severe that imprint could become a wound that doesn't heal – something like a scar – in other words a structural change whereby that part of our biology is damaged, perhaps irreversibly. For some time ahead it will not work properly so the everyday responses to stress that are so essential for our mind are impaired. This is what I am referring to as trauma. Bessel van der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps the Score* is an interesting account of how the treatment of trauma has evolved in recent decades and why post-traumatic stress, which is an abnormal stress response, is much more widely recognised today. Van der Kolk was influenced by Jaak Panksepp and by Stephen Porges as he notes in his foreword to Porges' book *The Polyvagal Theory* that I said earlier is one of my foundation stones for this Course.

There are different degrees of trauma. Front-line combat in a war zone (or even, nowadays in a civil shooting incident) has always been recognised as traumatic though it is only in very recent wars that the number of soldiers affected has been acknowledged. In textbooks as recently as 1980 the sexual abuse of children was said to be a rare occurrence and not a significant medical issue,

but it is now known that many millions of people, mostly women, have been affected all over the world. These are two of the most potent causes of long-term trauma, but there are many other forms of physical and mental abuse, especially of young people, that overwhelm the normal stress response with lasting effects. I can only speak indirectly about the healing of trauma, but in a later session I will be suggesting how we can change the biological patterns in our mind and body that are doing us more harm than good. I think we can also regard even minor trauma as an influential factor in the development of those secondary emotions that are associated with a higher than normal amount of suffering.

Not all secondary emotions are negative, of course. I have previously mentioned our mind's capacity for awe and wonder and I will talk about our appreciation of beauty in more detail. We learn to experience joy and pleasure in many different forms and each of us has an idea of what we call happiness, which many would say is our most important emotion because it is the one most people say they desire to achieve. People find their happiness in many different ways, but I am suggesting that, in every case, it stems from a simple set of primary emotions that are the basic biological processes of our everyday experience.

As an aside I should mention a different way of classifying emotions (more common before the advent of brain scanning) which was according to the way they are expressed in our faces. We can't see the emotion itself so we have to assess it indirectly and our facial expression is very revealing for some emotions. Long ago many people thought that emotions were cultural, not biological, and they thought that so-called primitive people such as Australian Aborigines didn't have the same emotions as the so-called civilised people because they weren't really complete human beings. Charles Darwin did not think this, but the egoic pride of the colonising Europeans led to this misjudgment. Famous research by an American, Paul Ekman, showed clearly that New Guinea tribesmen who had never seen a white person before could identify several different emotions from pictures of people's faces. Joy and sadness, fear and anger were the ones they found the easiest to pick, but also disgust and surprise to some extent. Since then nobody has doubted that those six emotions at least are universal biological phenomena. Others have been added on the basis of facial expression such as shame, guilt, hope, worry, embarrassment, contentment.

Jaak Panksepp's *seven primary emotions* could perhaps be called emotional modes because each one covers a range of effects. They are based on studies of the brain networks in humans and other mammals that consistently become active when that style of emotion becomes evident. I call them **seeking, fear, anger, grief, lust, care and play** for our purposes though he used slightly different terms for anger and grief. Each of them is a motivating and predisposing force that powerfully shapes our mind at every moment.

Seeking is the primary motivation to engage and to be aware that we must be re-engaging in each moment because we are caught up in the flow of endless change. We are seeking firstly to cope with change, which is stress, but also for opportunities that offer something new. We try to engage a little differently and our imagination must be active to find interesting new ways to engage. This is the basic driving force to not only stay alive, but enhance our wellbeing if we can by making life more interesting. Seeking is a pleasure in itself – in fact it is probably the main source of pleasure and therefore of happiness, which is why happiness is not really a destination, it's a pleasing aspect of the journey. The indefatigable nature of this will to go on living in a world of ceaseless change is the basis for all our hopes and dreams and it is what we have lost when we experience depression. I almost lost hope in my dark times and I am thankful that contact with other people restored my seeking emotion to its proper place at the forefront of my subconscious emotional mind.

The seeking motivation carries with it uncertainty and there will be surprises, some of which will be threatening, so the emotion of fear is also essential. We could not do without fear to alert us to danger and suggest ways of protecting ourselves from it. We also need it to stay alert and aware of possibilities. Without fear the mind gets sluggish and research has shown that we are cognitively

sharper because of our emotion of fear – so we can feel very thankful for it. But its derivatives such as chronic anxiety can be a terrible burden for our mind that narrow our attention and our imagination and diminish our ability to love. Anxiety is not the same as the base emotion of fear – it is a learned emotional state that affects some people more than others and causes considerable suffering – to be considered again later in the Course.

Anger arises in extreme situations when one's needs are seriously threatened. The classic case is in defence of our offspring or our own lives. In this situation it can preserve our autonomy and that of our descendants, but there does not seem to be much need for it in the healthy everyday use of the mind. The best ways of handling the 'hurts' we experience from time to time are the same as for coping with any other form of stress – that is by loving social engagement. Some people have argued that there is a physiological benefit in letting off steam by venting their anger, but research studies have not found any evidence that this helps to relieve pressure or facilitate the stress response. The derivative emotion, resentment, which is the chronic re-feeling of anger, can be very destructive for one's relationships and wellbeing.

Grief is also absolutely necessary at times because social bonds are so important to us that when they are broken we must mourn this loss for a period of time before our mind is ready to make new relationships. It is a mistake to suppress any of these emotions because they can be squeezed sideways into secondary emotions that cause other kinds of suffering. The sadness associated with grief used to be excluded from the diagnosis of clinical depression, but because the feelings and emotions involved are so similar, it has now been included with the caveat that it is expected to diminish over time. Our experience of mind has many sides to it and grief and sadness are inevitable because our need for one another is so strong.

Lust is also a biological necessity, not just for the purposes of reproduction, but because sexual intercourse is an important aspect of close human bonding with its release of hormones like oxytocin that promote mutuality and family responsibility. Because it is subject to serious misuse there is good reason to suppress it where necessary. Its secondary forms that are harmful include greed of all kinds – wanting more of everything – when sexual desires get mixed up with other acquisitive and possessive feelings thus losing their biological validity. The selfish nature of greed is very apparent in misplaced lust.

The primary emotion of care is evident in many other animals, but it is so highly developed in humans that it almost becomes the hallmark of our species. You will note that I have not defined love as a primary emotion even though it is the most obvious manifestation of the emotion of care. This is because I regard love as a more mysterious phenomenon that puts it outside the ambit of mere emotions, as I have already explained. I will spend most of the rest of this session talking about how the caring instinct plays out in our social engagement, leading to what I call **everyday love** in the next session. Our primary emotion of care is always attending to our fundamental need to be and belong, which is the reason that love is a biological necessity.

But before going on with that, we cannot forget the primary emotion of play, which again we share with animals, but which we have refined into an exquisite and essential feature of the human mind. There's a lovely book by Stuart Brown called *Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination and invigorates the soul* in which he shows why play is critical not only to being happy, but to sustaining healthy relationships and being creative in any way at all. In most other animals the interest in play wanes as they mature, but in humans it remains strong throughout our whole lives, even though adults quite often pretend to be disdainful of it. This is an aspect of the neoteny I mentioned before – staying young for longer – that is built in to our humanness along with vulnerability and the need for intimacy.

Play is hard to define because its purpose is quite arbitrary and it often includes improvisation so it utilises our imagination. Its natural attraction for us includes the fact that it's voluntary and it usually diminishes the self-consciousness that causes us trouble. Play has been shown to stimulate

the growth of brain networks and improve social skills and, like anything that strengthens and broadens our imagination, it is of great value for our mind. We could not do without it, which is why it is a primary emotional force shaping our lives.

The emotion of care expresses itself in so many ways that it defines, to a large extent, what is special about being human. Just as everyday love has its roots in the mother-baby relationship, so the primary instinct of care is first seen as parental care – protecting our offspring from danger and ensuring that their needs are met. Even as humans are conditioned to be more cynical about caring for such things as bandicoots and snakes, forests and rivers, birds and butterflies, we see evidence every day of the automatic caring response of one person for another. We all feel the hurt of another person, jump quickly to the aid of a child in distress, even guide an old person across the street without thinking about it. Human nature is fundamentally altruistic as books like Mathieu Ricard's *Altruism* explain and it is through caring for others that we gain our greatest happiness and satisfaction. I'll say more about that after the break.

The emotions could not simply be harbingers of joy and happiness because we are fundamentally imperfect beings and therefore will always be needy. Our needs as living creatures are often very clear to see and can be painful and even desperate. We undergo stress and need love because we are imperfect in that we cannot be entirely autonomous and connected – there is always an unmet need in one or both of these respects and so our mind is always compromised to some extent.

In writing about *The Intelligence of Emotions*, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum explains that every emotion is a subconscious appraisal of matters that are affecting us, but are not really under our control. They work together with thoughts to help us find the best way to continue to engage with our world. In this respect they show up, even more starkly than thoughts do, our fundamental neediness that is always present because we cannot control the future. They reveal our lack of self-sufficiency and vulnerability regarding every situation that we can't control – they are the witness to our imperfection.

Emotions have ambivalence built into them. To obtain satisfaction we must also be aware of frustration. As we try to act lovingly there always lurks an undercurrent that could be resentment or even dislike. To love unconditionally is a very risky business and much emotional pain can result from exposing yourself so honestly and finding that your trust has been exploited or rejected. So the power of our emotions is a two-edged sword. Inevitably our minds will carry some tormenting contradictions and it is helpful to accept this as part of the mystery that we do not need to understand.

It is here that our mind suffers from making too many judgments as I mentioned earlier. The perils of perfectionism are experienced as a strong feeling of shame. We are probably the only animals for whom our inherent neediness becomes a source of shame. Children who are shielded too much from their own failures are likely to grow up with insufficient regard for their natural state of imperfection. To be imperfect is normal and realising that fact is the source of strength that our mind needs. We see how this works in Brené Brown's book *The Gifts of Imperfection* and in another beautiful book by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham called *The Spirituality of Imperfection – Storytelling and The Search for Meaning*.

BREAK

When I was talking about the hidden aspects of our subconscious mind I mentioned the fact that we each construct our own view of the world and we often argue unnecessarily about something that is simply due to each of us having perceived things slightly differently. In our everyday experience there are all sorts of misunderstandings occurring all the time. My wife thought I was

angry with her about something she had done whereas I was actually upset at losing a valuable file from my computer and on another occasion I mistook her suggestion that we go shopping to be an invitation for me to buy a fancy new computer, which it wasn't! These are trivial examples; more serious misunderstandings can poison relationships over a period of time if they are not detected.

This brings me to the other main point I wanted to make today which is that we are searching for shared meanings – meanings that we can share with one another. Chapter 11 in my book is called ***Shared Meaning***.

Many people don't realise that the meaning that is formed in one's mind cannot be transferred directly to another person's mind. Each individual's mind can be influenced by outside forces, but at its core it has to manage itself to be autonomous so it is a semantically-closed unit. Whatever I am saying here came from my meaning-making process, but what it means to you is entirely your business. We tend to assume that what I meant is what you understood, but that could only happen if our minds were running identical flow patterns at that time, which is highly improbable, though a bit more likely if we have a lot of history in common.

Yet we must achieve meaningful connections as well as autonomy in order to survive. Thus we are blessed with this 'insatiable drive to link our minds together,' which is our social engagement system. It enables us to cope with the loneliness of knowing that I can't ever receive your exact meaning and you can't receive mine so the best we can do is try to find a meaning that we can share. Of course I pick up many hints from the words you use because they have a standard set of meanings assigned to them, but I still construct my own version and what we share is only the bit where my version overlaps with yours. This shared meaning is the glue that binds our minds together.

We generally regard our conversation as a rather mundane 'bread-and-butter' affair, but in fact it is an essential part of the core business of our mind. Simply chatting with another person activates all our mind's physiological processes throughout the body and brain, particularly our ANS because it involves our eyes and ears, tongue, mouth and face. What we see in another's face and hear in another's voice and what we express in return shapes each new moment of our lives. Some of the involuntary muscles also affect our ears so that our hearing varies according to our feelings; we are naturally better at hearing what we like to hear and sometimes we don't hear at all (as you probably know if you have children)!

My friend Alan Stewart has a little book called *Time to Converse – At the Heart of Human Warmth* in which he speaks about different modes of conversation, pointing out that argument, debate and discussion are not the same as an open non-judgmental conversing that is guided by mutual respect and by his motto that we simply aim to 'treat each other well.' The famous physicist, David Bohm, promoted a particular form of dialogue that he said tapped 'a pool of common meaning' and the practice known as Appreciative Enquiry aims to 'ignite the collective imagination.' An English philosopher, Theodore Zeldin, who founded the Oxford Muse, pointed out that conversation changes the way we see the world and then it changes the world, which fits nicely with Maturana's explanation that our culture is created through our conversation.

Shared meaning is especially important in the workplace where it is more objective because we need the logic of language to coordinate our individual actions if we are to work together and get things done. But even here we underestimate the emotional part of the mind at our peril, because if people do not have their heart in doing something they may not do it very well. The part of our mind that makes judgments and tries to exercise control drives most of what we do at work, but there is a fine balance between the demands of a selfish and manipulative ego and the humble awareness of larger-than-self goals that will benefit everyone involved.

Shared meaning is not always a pleasant experience. What you perceive about another person comes partly from him or her and partly from your own mind. If someone criticises you and you already feel inadequate in that respect the shared meaning will be especially unpleasant. If you can separate your own opinion from that expressed by the other person the only shared meaning might be that you agree to disagree. A common obstacle to sharing meaning is a lack of confidence in ourselves because, if we haven't connected with others from a place that feels worthy, we are more sensitive to criticism and so we may feel the need to either please others unnaturally or argue the point to put them down.

Our self-esteem, by equipping us to be comfortable with our own feelings, also makes possible the wonderful human connections that we call empathy and compassion. Empathy is a special form of shared meaning in which both parties feel they can understand what the other is feeling. It begins with being non-judgmental, which makes it different from sympathy where we separate ourselves from others by judging them. You don't have to feel exactly the same feelings to empathise with someone, but you do have to open your mind and imagine you can listen with your heart. This shared meaning might even be subconscious such as when a grandparent empathises with her grandchild who is growing up about feelings that are strange and new to the youngster, but understood only too well by the older person. This sharing occurs beneath and beyond conscious thought.

The idea from research in monkeys that there are 'mirror neurons' in our brain that respond directly to tiny clues we pick up about another person's actions or intentions has excited many researchers in recent decades. It sounds like a good explanation for our empathic ability and there may be a 'mirror neuron system' in humans and the 'spindle cells' may be involved, but this has not yet been properly substantiated in our species. Marco Iacobono wrote a delightful book called *Mirroring People – The Science of Empathy and How We Connect With Others*, but contrary views are expressed in a more recent book by Gregory Hickock called *The Myth of Mirror Neurons*. I think we are often attracted to simple mechanistic explanations, even for processes of the mind that are so complex there will probably always be some mystery associated with them. The famous fictional character, Harry Potter, was chastised by Professor Snape for thinking that the villain, Voldemort, could extract feelings and memories from another person's mind by 'mind-reading.' Snape said, 'you have no subtlety, Potter. Only Muggles talk of mind-reading. The mind is not a book.'

Barack Obama called for Americans to address the 'empathy deficit' in their society – an unusual request in the political context where deficit usually refers to finances. An American futurist, Jeremy Rifkin, in his book *The Empathic Civilization*, says there is a 'dawning realisation that we are a fundamentally empathic species . . . we have discovered *Homo empathicus*.' He explains how empathy only became recognised in psychology and in society during the second half of the last century. Before that, at the height of behaviourism, John Watson was supposed to have said 'mother love is a dangerous instrument . . . never hug or kiss your children.'

Compassion is one of our greatest gifts and most worthwhile endeavours, as the Dalai Lama reminds us regularly. Like empathy it is also a relationship between equals, but in this case recognising shared meaning in terms of one another's needs and the desire for those needs to be met – without being crippled by that neediness. An unselfish benevolent concern for the good of another person is an acknowledgment that we all suffer, but that we also believe in the relief of suffering as our universal human right.

Compassionate friends are the most likely relievers of our suffering, but the therapist-patient relationship has become increasingly important. No matter what type of therapy it is there will be shared meaning involved. Pilar Jennings, an experienced Buddhist psychoanalyst, wrote about this kind of relationship in a way that freed it from the doctor-patient inequalities and academic obscurities that I think bedevil the mental health industry to some extent. In her book *Mixing Minds – The Power of Relationship in Psychoanalysis and Buddhism*, she described the experience as being an

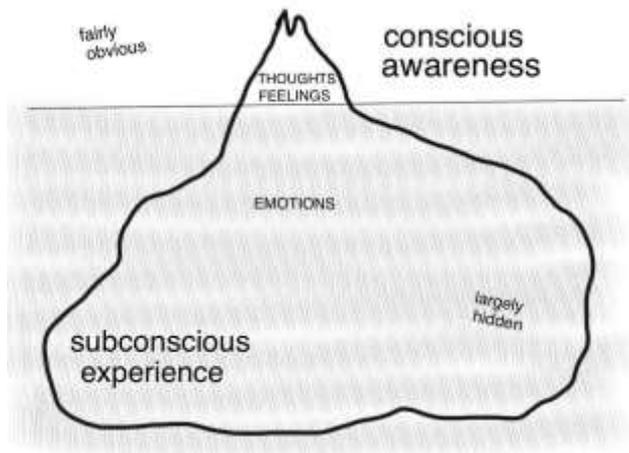
empathic and compassionate relationship. She said ‘we cannot find ourselves or be ourselves alone.’ My favourite psychotherapist/author, Irving Yalom, in *Love’s Executioner*, said his professional dictum was: ‘it’s the relationship that heals, the relationship that heals, . . .’

I think there is a special sense available through our feelings that is the sense of movement or flow in one another’s psyche and it is part of our deepest shared meaning. When we experience empathy and compassion I think we feel a similarity or sameness in this movement pattern – it’s as if we are a pair of dancers on the dance floor for the duration of that song. Another way of experiencing this is when you are singing a duet or in a choir or making any kind of music together.

Self-compassion is important, too, because the relationship with yourself is one of the three kinds of connections that our mind needs to make. The self-pity I suffered during my dark times was not a healthy way of doing this because my obsession with myself kept me trapped until the mind’s great need for shared meaning showed me the way out. In honest conversation with others I became aware of my lack of connectedness and that I needed new relationships that were outside this closed loop of my egoc mind – not only with other people, but with myself in a more compassionate way, and with something unknown.

Perhaps the biggest mystery of the mind is that we could share meaning with something outside of ourselves that is unknown. In his beautiful book, *Eternal Echoes*, about our yearning to belong, John O’Donohue refers to our soul as a ‘divine echo that whispers in every heart.’ ‘The shelter of belonging empowers you,’ he writes, but it seems that it never extinguishes the flame of further longing so we will always be driven by an unrequited desire to connect that is somehow ordained for us by love. As I said previously I think of my soul as the part of my mind that seems to know that I am loved, which is a great source of strength that I need – I think we all need – when life is difficult.

To see ourselves as one amongst many other living things in an ecosystem that we call the biosphere is surely the foundation of our desire for shared meaning. If we disconnect from the natural world around us we deprive our mind of part of its reason for being, which is to share meaning in all possible ways. Andreas Weber has recently taken us on a giant step towards enlarging the science of biology to acknowledge that the ‘feelings’ that produce ‘meaning’ are a universal feature of all living things and a reasonable definition of life itself. You might recall from my earlier description of the function of mind that I said each cell tries to ‘connect with its surroundings in a meaningful way’ – that is in a way that keeps it going. Our quest to find shared meaning is a fundamental process of both mind and life. If we neglect or destroy our environment we damage ourselves at the same time.



Emotions, feelings and thoughts.



Panksepp's seven primary emotions.

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honourably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

Rumi - The Guest House (c. 1250)