

## 2016 U3A Course based on

### Dancing With the Unknown

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

Session 3 – March 14, 2016

The *everyday experience of mind* includes our thoughts, emotions and feelings and in this Course I have a lot to say about *feelings*. By *experience* I mean what is happening to you and I in each moment of our lives, in which our feelings are the leading edge of what our mind is doing – for example, what you are feeling as you walk in the door and take your seat for this lecture is a crucial part of what you are thinking. There is a history to this feeling also – it connects with the way you were feeling when you woke up this morning and whatever happened on your way to this place. And also with your whole life experience in more subtle and subconscious ways.

I like to divide this ‘experience’ we are having into two stages, the first being an immediate effect on our emotions, the second an appraisal of what has happened so as to put it into thoughts, which is our story. Part of the history is contained in our story, which carries a *thread of meaning* that is very important for our wellbeing. What we are getting from each experience is a subjective sense of meaning that runs like a thread through our lives and holds our mind together. What we call *wellbeing* is really the sum of our feelings over a period of time.

My book begins with a question: is there a proper way of using one’s mind that would be most likely to lead to nice feelings of wellbeing and satisfaction – happiness, if you like? And if there is, and you were not using it or using it wrongly somehow, would that lead to bad feelings like worry or despair? Or, on the other hand, is the mind a law unto itself – its own master – that will do what it does regardless of how you try to manage it? In other words: do we have any control over the way we use our mind and, if so, how might we use our mind to best effect? What is it about one’s mind that creates feelings of wellbeing or, on the other hand, feelings of despair? The first Chapter in the book is called *The Proper Use of the Mind?* Note the question mark. I am asking if there is there such a thing?

Here I am thinking about ordinary people in everyday situations and the subject is wellness – as I said before. I will need to mention things about the mind that are diagnosed as mental illness – or as Col Jennings puts it, ‘emotional illness,’ – from time to time, but I leave it entirely up to others to determine where the boundary is drawn between wellness and disease. That’s not my field. In this book I am drawing on three main sources for what I hope will be interesting information for you about the mind and soul. The first is all the books I have been reading and studying, particularly over the last 15 years since I retired from the workforce. The second is my own life experience – as I said this book is a more personal story than I have written before. The third is my own past research, from the time I completed my PhD, which was on the subject of stress.

I fell in love with the subject of *physiology* (animal physiology as distinct from plant physiology) from the very first lecture I attended. Our physiology lecturer was one of those people who grabbed your attention immediately by his enthusiasm for the subject; he fascinated me and I hung off every word he said. I felt I wanted to work in this field – this was what I wanted to do – and I was hungry to learn a lot more about how the body works. I had come off a dairy farm (and from a boarding school that was also a farm) and I had a close relationship

with nature in many ways and with all farm animals. I was interested in the things they went through during their lives and I was keen to learn more about the internal processes involved – which is physiology.

As part of that I wanted to know what role the mind played in the workings of the body. I was thinking of animals as well as humans – in fact, all living things. I was basically a biologist, because I always felt that our relationship with nature was very important and that all living things are related and have a lot in common. I didn't know then that I was going to be studying and doing research on the experience that we call *stress* in both animals and humans for the rest of my working life. Stress is a very basic part of what our mind does and how it works as I will be explaining as we get towards the end of Term 1.

I felt about mind that it was the bedrock of biology – the most basic thing – because I believed that all living things have a mind of some sort, even though it might be very different from our human mind. If you live with animals around you all the time you get a feeling for what they are thinking and you can often guess what they're going to do, even though you are also aware that their mind is unlike ours in many ways. I got to know an American woman called Temple Grandin because we were doing similar research work with cattle and sheep. She is an autistic person and she became a world authority on autism in humans – you may have come across her work somewhere. She always said that she could think like the cattle did and this helped her to design yards and handling facilities for them.

I've already said that mind is such an enormous subject that I can only give you a tiny taste of what it might be like and how it works, but I hope that tiny taste will be something you can actually use in your lives as I do. To do this I have to oversimplify some things, but in doing that I don't want to distort the science, so I have to take you through some basic biological science during this Course, particularly in Term 1.

So this question was always there in the back of my mind – whether there is an optimal or proper way of using one's mind that consistently produces the best results and *what happens if you lose that ability – if you lose the proper use of your mind?* My story in this book begins with a personal answer to the second question – what happens if you start to lose your mind.

My own experience is that it happens so gradually you don't realise anything is wrong until there is a crisis of some sort. In my case it was a combination of marriage and financial problems, reduced output and missed opportunities at work, and a lot of very bad feelings that gradually took over my whole life. Part of my problem was an unhealthy habitual need to consume alcohol. I drank too much. In this book I am not going to use the terms addiction or dependency or alcoholism because they are quite difficult to define (and we don't need to do that), but I will talk quite a bit about habits and the way they affect our mind. We all know what habits are and we probably all know what bad habits are. Some bad habits are worse than others and can be very destructive and if you're drinking too much alcohol as a regular habit you can slide into a very miserable state of mind.

One's story changes during the course of this downhill slide. I had a rather blissful childhood on the farm before I entered university at quite a young age as an extremely shy boy with very few social skills – so socially inept that I started to take refuge in alcohol at that time. It seemed to help me to cope. I had a very lively imagination and up until then it seemed to be my friend and it inspired me without interfering too much with the reality of my day-to-day living. I didn't live in fantasy land, but I somehow knew I had the resources inside me to live well no matter what happened. This is what deserted me over the next few years as my mind went downhill. In this Course I'm going to speak quite a lot about *imagination*. It's an aspect of our mind that can easily be underestimated especially if you pay more attention to the rational thinking part

of the mind and forget about the emotional part.

Einstein is quoted as saying that ‘imagination is more important than knowledge’ because knowledge is limited to what we know now, but imagination can extend far wider across all the things we don’t know or understand. The important thing to note about imagination is that what happens physically and chemically in our brain when we imagine something is almost identical to what happens when that same thing occurs in reality. This has been demonstrated very clearly by brain scanning. One difference is that there is a greater flow of activity *towards* the visual cortex in the very back of the brain when you are imagining something instead of *away* from the visual cortex when you actually see it. But the changes in the brain caused by imagining are essentially the same as if you were seeing it or doing it in reality so this affects the direction our brain is heading in and what will happen next in our experience. In other words if you have a good imagination you will see more possibilities and opportunities. If you don’t, your mind becomes partially closed down, which is what was happening to me.

Over the next 20 years my story became narrower and narrower as my feelings became gradually more dependent on things outside of myself. Neglecting the inner resources I used alcohol, relationships, sport and success at work to make me feel good so I needed progressively more of these as each year passed. My feelings became harder and harder to satisfy with these external things and they gradually got worse. It’s a very gradual process – you hardly notice what is happening until one day you say: how did I end up here? I call this the dark period in my life from the age of 17 to 37 although it was only the last few years of that in my mid-thirties where I believe I lost touch with the proper use of my mind.

In this dark period I struggled with great dissatisfaction, persistent low-level anxiety and bouts of deep despair that became more frequent as time went on. I was not diagnosed with a mind-related illness, perhaps partly because the diagnostic criteria in the 1970’s were somewhat different from what they are today. What had happened to my imagination was that I was losing hope all the time. My imagination became no more than a place of false refuge in which unhelpful fantasies were gradually replacing my actual experience. My story lost touch with reality.

I now see this period as an *improper* use of my mind, but I’m grateful for it nonetheless because it enabled me to see more clearly what it is about my mind that works well and what doesn’t work. I found that sharing this experience could be helpful for me and for others. And, as I have been saying, more and more people seem to be suffering from a lack of mental wellness. The incidence of reported anxiety and depression has escalated in many countries today with a staggering amount of personal suffering and loss of productivity. A best-selling book by Scott Stossel from 2014 called *My Age of Anxiety* gives a sobering account of the extent of this problem and the lack of any obvious solution. Nobody seems to know how to stem the tide of this worldwide problem. The other book I brought in today is one of the best books I’ve read on depression by Andrew Solomon called *The Noonday Demon*.

Attempts to deal with this very alarming situation throughout the world fall into two categories. If it is due to the biological circumstances of individuals, both genetic and environmental in origin, then medical intervention is the answer and the resources available for treatment have never been greater. As more is learned about chemical imbalances in our brain and body new pharmaceutical ‘fixes’ are appearing every year. Scott Stossel explains how widespread is the use of mood-altering drugs, how common are their side-effects and how inconsistent have been their benefits. Yet many a potential suicide or broken life (including his own) has also been rescued by these drugs.

The second category of healing, especially favoured by opponents of ‘Big Pharma’ and critics

of prescriptive psychiatry, is to harness one's own inner resources, which I'm calling the better use of the mind. Stossel tried this too and he states poignantly that he would dearly like to unlock the cabinet of truly effective inner resources, but he finds himself '*fumbling with the keys.*' This is the situation in the developed world today with both a widespread reliance on mood-altering substances and an equally widespread, intuitive desire to find and use more natural means of feeling good – or at least okay.

I can now sum up the way I felt at the age of 37 in terms of two gaping holes in my existence. One was where my self-esteem should have been. Gradually I had lost confidence in myself as an individual to the point of actually hating myself at times. Driven by doubts about my own autonomy and ability to survive – I began to doubt my own right to be here at all – I told lies and developed a bravado based on fantasies that were the best my now limited imagination could come up with to get me out of this prison for brief periods. My story had become so bleak there seemed to be no way out into the sunlight again – in effect, no hope.

The other hole was that my relationships had mostly dried up. My marriage was 'on the rocks' and most of my so-called 'friends' were drinking buddies whom I didn't really like anyway. My loneliness carried with it the feeling that, because I was unlovable, I had never really been loved very much by anyone, which made me feel sorry for myself in a way that is poisonous for any kind of relationship. That was my story so I believed it. It's hard to convince yourself otherwise in that situation. Often racked with self-pity I imagined unrealistic ways of being connected to other people and lived in these fantasies instead of in reality. I felt I had become disconnected from the world. This what happens when the imagination faculty of your mind is not working properly.

These were seriously bad feelings as anyone who has experienced them would know, but with hindsight I can also see there were a few saving graces about the way my mind worked that I will mention as we go along because they are important for my story.

Now, you don't have to live my particular story to experience these two holes in your life to some degree. We all have bad feelings about ourselves and about our relationships at times. A Sydney psychiatrist, Julian Short, identified (1) perceived deficiencies as an *individual* (not liking yourself) and (2) perceived difficulties with *relationships* (feeling lacking in love) as the most common conditions that he and other clinicians encounter. This in the book *An Intelligent Life*, which is a very readable book and, although he explains the biology with a different emphasis to my own, his basic principles are exactly the same as I'm outlining in this Course.

I suggest that those two problems he identified are, in a nutshell, the consequences of losing the proper use of one's mind. I experienced them to such a degree that it took me many years to recover completely after I stopped drinking alcohol at the age of 37; you may have handled them better. The good news, in my view, is that those symptoms tell us exactly what we need to know about our mind and soul to make better use of them. And all the other things I will be talking about in this Course are based on this idea.

In short they tell us that the function of our mind is to *maintain and promote (1) our healthy autonomy as individuals and (2) our connections with the world through loving relationships* of all kinds.

This simple way of describing it didn't mean much to me at first, but today it feels like the most important thing I have ever learned about the mind. My love affair with the science of physiology in particular and biology in general eventually led me to see more clearly how this actually works in my everyday experience. This is what I will be describing as we continue with the book.

But the science was not the whole story. The objectivity of scientific thinking provides us with

mechanistic explanations so we know how things work. But I'm not talking here about my car or my computer; I'm talking about my life! The pain and anguish I experienced during those dark times woke me up to the possibility that I might never overcome my lack of wellness if I continued to use my mind as I always had; in fact the harder I tried to think my way into a better way of living the more hopeless my situation seemed to be.

That dawning realisation of my powerlessness was the starting point. I reached a stage where I wanted to change so badly I was ready to give up some *self*-reliance and admit that there might be more to this problem than I could ever figure out with my rational mind. Up until then I thought that the only resource I had to draw on to fix this problem was my own thinking. I felt I had to solve my problems myself and I had given up asking other people or looking outside of myself for help. I had unwittingly developed an inflated sense of what I knew and what I didn't know so I thought that, logically, I had to know the answer. Even the idea that I could control the proper use of my mind was a form of scientific hubris.

Of course I was aware that there were things I didn't know and might never know, but I didn't believe they were terribly important and I saw no need to heed or respect what was unknown. My pain triggered *ego-deflation* and my mind entertained a new kind of humility that was not to do with other people – it meant deferring to the fact that what was completely unknown to me was apparently very influential in my life.

There was a university professor I knew who would start off his teaching by drawing on the blackboard the biggest circle possible, filling almost the whole board. He would say that circle represents the sum total of everything there is to know. Then he would make a tiny dot of chalk in the corner of the board and say that represents the sum total of what we do know – the sum of all human knowledge. In other words what is known is miniscule compared to what there is to know. We can't prove this, of course. It is a belief that I came to develop during the worst times of my life. Famous scientists over the years have said the opposite to this – that we are on the brink of knowing everything about the world or our brain or our mind. To give you just one example, Lord Kelvin in Britain said at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that there was nothing more to be learned about physics now that the laws of thermodynamics and electrical fields had been worked out. Within decades the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics had changed the world completely!

I wasn't sure if this unknown that was affecting was an external supernatural force that I called God or something else unknown about my mind so I didn't label it at the time as a 'religious' experience. I'm speaking about it now in this book, primarily, as a much better way of using my mind that stems from the fact pointed out recently by Sam Harris – a critic of religion who wrote a book about spirituality – that '*there is more to understanding the human condition than science and secular culture generally admit.*' Later I came to agree with the view expressed by an eminent astronomer/scientist, Carl Sagan, in his Gifford lectures, that '*if we ever reach a point where we think we thoroughly understand who we are and where we came from, we will have failed.*'

This shift in my mind (and soul) did not diminish my enthusiasm for science; in fact I felt that I could now utilise what we learn from science more effectively. In subsequent Chapters of this book I will return to this idea of recognising *the unknown*. It might sound like a limitation to the use of the mind, but I see it now as a strength, even though it implies that there is some kind of 'larger-than-self authority' involved.

BREAK

The second Chapter in the book is called *My Mind and I*.

The relationship with one's mind is a curious business. I can't avoid talking about my mind as if it is something separate from me, yet I also think of it as being me – the most obvious manifestation of me. I can't escape from it into a separate body; that wouldn't work anyway because my mind is there as well. It's been known for thousands of years (*e.g.* in yoga) that body movements and postures affect one's mind.

To believe that I am what I think I am has quite a good philosophical pedigree, but the assumption that I therefore know my mind and can control it is misleading. Some people claim to have great power over their minds, but for most of us it's all too obvious that our mind is either a disobedient servant or even our master. Try telling yourself to go to sleep or stop thinking about your new 'toy' or your very sick friend. Saying to someone, or to yourself, that you should not be anxious or depressed is as futile as trying to stop the tide coming in.

Of course we all know that a large part of our mind is unconscious or *subconscious*. It can generally be trusted to run all the things we take for granted such as our breathing, our digestion, our heartbeat and so on. It also seems to influence our thoughts and our behaviour in subtle ways that we try to decipher in psychology, but which still remain shrouded in mystery. My experience of ego-deflation did not diminish my desire to know more about psychology either, but it gave me an ever-growing respect for this mystery. The term I use for respecting the unknown is *spirituality*. I now believe that this is what was missing during the dark period of my life.

A well-known spiritual teacher, Eckhart Tolle, began his first book (*The Power of Now*) with a description of his own life-changing experience regarding his mind. You probably know the book – it had a lot of publicity at the time. Until he was 29 years of age, Tolle lived with '*almost continuous anxiety interspersed with periods of suicidal depression.*' His recurring thought: '*I cannot live with myself*' brought a sudden awareness one day that there seemed to be two of him: an 'I' and a 'self' that the 'I' couldn't live with and one of these was causing the problem and could even be an imposter. This set in motion his life of spiritual teaching based on recognising the aspects of one's mind that claim to be real, but are actually false. I came to believe that these lies the mind tells us could be the obstacles that were preventing me from discovering the proper use of my mind. When people said to Tolle: 'I want what you have' he would say: '*you have it already. You just can't feel it because your mind is making too much noise.*'

My experience has been to try to understand my mind's noisy self-deception. Its lies include the idea that I am not loved, that other people are somehow fundamentally better than I am and that I have certain weaknesses and habits that are so entrenched they could never be changed. These are all to do with my *self-consciousness*, which is a very narrow perspective given that I am actually just one member of an enormously large population of living things. Later in this book I will speak about self-confidence, which is entirely different. This problem of self-consciousness will come up again during the Course because it is one of the commonest ways that we lose touch with the proper use of our mind.

The imposter in Tolle's explanation is the very notion of the egoic *self*. An inflated ego creates an illusory self that makes judgments and thinks it knows things that are way beyond its reach. I have found that the harder I work to protect and support a particular sense of self the more prone I am to self-deception. I believe now that this is because what we think of as one's self does not exist in isolation. We are one amongst many, totally dependent on other living beings to survive. It's true that I need to have my autonomy, but if I see this in context I realise that there could be no autonomy without connectedness to others – no me without my relationships.

Perhaps you have been walking in the wilderness or standing on a mountaintop at sunrise or looking out across the ocean and experienced a sense of awe that you are such a small part of something much bigger than yourself. A smaller sense of self seems to enable a larger sense of belonging. The important new field of *social neuroscience* has grown from the idea that our individual minds are co-created with others through our relationships. We are not just individuals who get into relationships; we become the individuals we are because of what we do in our relationships.

So the question becomes: is there a way we could manage our own minds effectively yet humbly? The answer to this question is also the main message that this book is trying to convey. It happens through the way we attend to our connectedness – by paying attention to our relationships with other people, with the world in general and with the unknown. This *attention* process will be discussed in detail later on. For the time being you might like to think about whether you are mindful of where you are putting your attention as you go through the day – often we are not. Whenever I am not being mindful of where I am putting my attention it is likely that some relationship or other is being neglected.

My mind and I are on better terms today because we do not think we exist separately from everything else, especially other human beings, so self-consciousness is not quite the blight it used to be. It's still there of course! It is tempered by the belief that my mind is subject to other influences that are fundamentally unknown. Something else is going on and I don't even know what it is!

This means that I replaced my sole reliance on scientific explanations of our physical nature with a broader explanation that includes the *metaphysical*, by which I mean the non-empirical. Metaphysics is notoriously difficult to define, but I will return to it later in the Course. My most ardent scientific colleagues believe that it's only a matter of time before all will be explained in physical terms, but my position is that for now – and for the foreseeable future – that is not the case.

Of course many famous scientists respect the unknown so I am in good company. My first physiology professor gave me a copy of *Man the Unknown* by Nobel laureate, Alexis Carrel, who was a famous physiologist who thought the material realm of the body was incomplete without the soul. Also as a student I devoured books like *Animal Nature and Human Nature* by W. H. Thorpe, a founder of the science of ethology, who concluded that our human consciousness was a unique form of meaning that he called '*religious*.' The great philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, was a champion of the human mind, but he also criticised our '*absurd trust*' in the '*adequacy of our knowledge*' that has seduced science into claiming to be the final word on everything.

In the next Session we will take a closer look at what we do know (or think we know) about the operation of our mind because that can also be very useful.