

2016 U3A Course based on

Dancing With the Unknown

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

Session 16 – November 7, 2016

Chapter 18 of my book is called *A Need for Beauty*. The only definitive thing I can say about beauty is that, whatever it is, we need it. Our mind has a crucial need to experience something we call beauty and without it our mind is impoverished and our wellbeing will suffer. I will be relating some things that people have written and said about beauty and my own thoughts about it and I hope that perhaps you can reflect on your own experience of beauty today and refresh your own mind with feelings and thoughts about this mysterious aspect of our mind, which is both intensely personal and thoroughly universal at the same time.

We have been talking about serious matters such as suffering and the courage to change – and then about values and morals – so today I also want to come back to one of our most basic instincts, the primary emotion of **Play**. This is a very important part of our mind that is generally underestimated – we think play is just an added extra you might get to do sometimes, but our mind is doing it all the time and we need it. Play is one of the seven instinctual emotions that we are born with and it engages that important part of our mind that is our **imagination**.

I have tried to keep the idea of imagination alive as a thread in this story because it is an aspect of our mind we could not do without. I have tried to explain that, though imagination is essential, it is not necessarily always disposed towards our wellbeing. Not all of the activity going on in our imagination is making us feel good. When it is too self-conscious it can be a tormentor of the mind as I tried to illustrate from my own experience. In my dark times my imagination created fantasies about how much better my life would be if things were different and these illusions became narrower and more self-centred so I could not see how to get help and I became trapped in a smaller and smaller prison of the mind. As I said before the key to this prison is on the inside so you have to open up before other people can help you.

It is the awareness of things outside one's self – of other people with whom you can have relationships – and of a whole world of mystery and wonder that comes with what I have called 'recognising the unknown' that activates the most useful function of our imagination. This is the basic function of mind that is our connectedness. If you recall, *autonomy* and *connectedness* are the two requirements to be alive – therefore the two basic functions of our mind. What happened to me in those dark times – and can happen to a certain extent for any of us – is that I became anxious about my self-contained little world and preoccupied with that so I was neglecting the bigger picture, which is not only our social engagement, but includes our attention and awareness of values and beauty.

I have tried to explain in this Course that who we are and how we feel depends very much on what we pay attention to and with whom we connect. I am the person that I am due to the combination of my genes and my history of relationships with others and with the world. That begins with people who showed me love, people who have been my teachers, those I've worked alongside and talked with in rooms like this. They are people with whom I enjoyed *shared meaning* through *the magic of social engagement* and also through the pain of *suffering* and for whom I have felt *everyday love* – to use some of the Chapter titles of this book as reference points. I have been suggesting

throughout that the best strategy for managing our feelings and enjoying wellbeing is to attend to our relationships.

To do this we have to notice what is around us. In the last session I said that it is a sense of values that draws us into relationships – attracts us to certain things – and these can range from quite selfish, practical needs, which we may have to satisfy first, up to a desire for spiritual comfort and aesthetic comfort that is hard to define. In between these two extremes is the quality of our empathy and compassion and our concern for the rest of the world. We have choices about where to put our attention and whether our awareness will include the broader context in which we live or be narrowly focussed for the purpose of control and manipulation. It is our right-brain activity, more than the left, that enables us to appreciate the interconnectedness of everything.

This interconnectedness is most evident in the natural world around us. There is beauty everywhere in Nature that we can attend to if we wish. In the beautiful Blue Mountains where we live there is everything from sweeping views across great valleys to secluded pockets of wildflowers almost hidden amongst the sandstone rocks – waterfalls, trees, a few small animals, a cave and smooth rock that is perhaps a sacred place, at least to the people that lived here long ago. The people living here now bring their own versions of colour and form in their gardens. We don't see beauty in everything we notice, but it is good for our mind to notice it where we can.

Diane Ackerman is a poetic writer who experiences beauty in all sorts of things. She has written more than 20 books including *An Alchemy of Mind* about neuroscience and the brain, *The Natural History of the Senses* and *One Hundred Names for Love*, written after her partner, who is also a writer, had lost the ability to speak following a severe stroke. She often uses the interconnectedness of Nature as a theme, particularly in her book, *Deep Play*, where she salutes the merry dance of a penguin colony she saw in Antarctica and describes her experiences of swimming with dolphins, cycling through forests or gazing at a comet as it travels across the sky.

Some lines from one of her poems called *School Prayer* resonate with me because I am trying to capture in this Course some sense of the beauty of life itself as it manifests in the operation of our mind.

*In the name of the daybreak
and the eyelids of morning
and the wayfaring moon
and the night when it departs,*

*I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly
As a guardian of nature, as a healer of misery,
as a messenger of wonder, as an architect of peace.
I will honor all life – wherever and in whatever form it may dwell – on Earth my home and in
the mansions of the stars*

Each one of us will experience beauty differently and yet there will be a lot of overlap as well because life itself has a beauty and a grandeur that is beyond what we can name and define.

Just as we can't define values yet we experience them, beauty is impossible to define but we all seem to experience it and we all seem to desire it as well. An English philosopher, Sir Roger Scruton, says in several books that our intuitive appreciation of beauty is so absolutely essential for our mind that if we lost it we could not be human. He says repeatedly that it is crucial for our pursuit of meaning and if its influence declines our wellbeing will suffer. We need to consider whether that could be happening.

Without our aesthetic sense we would find only superficial kinds of meaning in anything we do. That this sense is built in to our biology is explained well by Stephen Davies, a philosophy

professor from Auckland, in a book called *The Artful Species - Aesthetics, Art and Evolution*. Not everyone agrees, but I think there is a strong case that the aesthetic sense is biologically-based and evolved as a key element of human nature. Davies says 'aesthetic responses and art behaviours are the touchstones of our humanity.' Denis Dutton who wrote *The Art Instinct - Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution* also came to the conclusion that our artistic tendencies are basic instincts that we've had for a long time.

They believe that very early humans must have had an 'aesthetic sensibility' – a taste for the creation and appreciation of beauty. This is evident in early musical instruments, in stone axes found at burial sites, honed and polished for their colour, sheen and shape far beyond functional necessity and also in the great lengths taken to produce elaborate cave art in very inaccessible places. Some prominent neuroscientists including Steven Pinker have tried to write art and music out of our evolutionary development altogether, dismissing it as an unintended side-effect (which they call a spandrel). Davies dismisses the idea that the aesthetic sense was an accidental by-product and believes it has been a crucial part of our evolutionary progress and the development of humanness.

When the theory of aesthetics was first being formulated in the 18th century it was said to have two qualities: the beautiful and the sublime, the latter being what made something awesome or mysterious. Nowadays there is less mention of the sublime. Aesthetics is not simply a feeling of pleasure; you can get good feelings from being praised or massaged or eating when you are hungry that you might value yet associate only vaguely with beauty, but in art you are appreciating value more directly. Davies said that 'aesthetic experience is very like an emotion - it's an attention-focussing, value-charged response.'

Nevertheless, some people try to describe beauty in terms of purely objective properties, but the most plausible explanations about our aesthetic sensibilities go in the opposite direction by accepting the mystery of this kind of experience. Another book by John O'Donohue is called *Divine Beauty - The Invisible Embrace*. He wrote that the experience of beauty suggests it is from elsewhere; it's not what was already there. To notice it we need to have some reverence for the unknown and acknowledge incompleteness because what we already know is not the full story of who we are and where our lives are going – there will always be more to it than what we think we know.

John O'Donohue described beauty as 'a light that comes from the soul' and a wealth that we often neglect. He argued that 'much of the stress and emptiness that haunts us can be traced back to our lack of attention to beauty.' Our mind naturally seeks it everywhere, but we often mistake glamour for beauty and glamour is only skin deep. The very first effect it has on your mind is the only effect it will ever have whereas beauty is an invitation into a deeper world of meaning, knowing that you are alive for reasons other than productivity and consumption. O'Donohue said the hunger for beauty is the soul's way of embracing the unknown.

He said that beauty calls forth by pointing to something and that only in the light of beauty do we see the meaning of it. That is how its integrity is revealed, its adequacy, what it is meant to be. This is the same as I said about love. To try to see something as it really is we call on that special ability our mind has to feel love, to recognise values and to appreciate beauty. An American poet, Frederick Turner, writes that beauty is 'the highest integrative level of understanding and the most comprehensive capacity for effective action' because it enables us to work with, not against, our truest human nature.

Because beauty happens in our experience it has to be noticed so our appreciation of it depends on where we choose to direct our attention. McGilchrist believes that the left side of our brain is designed to give us the most explicit kind of meaning – it can't really give us anything else – and this denies us the experience of beauty. 'Explicitness kills, renders lifeless,' he firmly states. It is our right brain that gives us context rather than abstraction, flow instead of fixity and the ability to see visual depth in art and hear harmony in music. McGilchrist felt strongly that undue reliance

on our left brain has neutralised the power of the arts so that, as he puts it, ‘beauty has been airbrushed out.’

Our right brain does most of the work of discriminating facial expressions and understanding other people’s feelings with empathy and the main focus of attention for this is around the other person’s eyes. I find, when my left hemisphere is dominant because I am struggling to grasp the logic of what another person is saying, that my attention is more on the words being spoken and I am more likely to be looking directly at the other person’s mouth. The emotional nuance in language is better understood using the right hemisphere. The left brain is equipped to detect meaning in terms of words, but, of course, meaning is more than the words as we know from our appreciation of music and art. The brain seems to deal with the lyrics of a song with its right hemisphere. People who suffer aphasia from a left brain stroke, for example, can often sing the words of songs although they cannot speak a sentence. A relative of mine had exactly this experience.

McGilchrist’s explanation of the changing culture of the Western world makes fascinating reading. In the history of art, prior to the 6th century BC, faces were depicted as expressionless and looking straight ahead. Then came a new interest in facial expression which meant that the majority of paintings showed faces looking towards the viewer’s left. This emphasised the subject’s left side (right brain) and put the focus of attention in the viewer’s left visual field (also the right brain). According to McGilchrist this greater use of the right hemisphere disappeared in the Dark Ages, reappeared in the Renaissance, and has now disappeared again. He attributed the great surge in the creative arts generally (poetry, theatre etc.) after the 6th century BC to a period of right brain dominance in human history.

This was also the beginning of the Greek philosophy that so strongly shaped Western culture. McGilchrist referred to Plato’s poignant struggle between his natural poetic sense (in allegories such as *The Cave*) and his left-hemisphere need to worship form (and Socrates) and dismiss all emotion and the arts as evil forces to be suppressed. Subsequently, Aristotle and others tempered this view, but philosophy generally ensured that faith in intuition would be in decline from that time onward. I have wondered, a little sadly, about Socrates own lament, before he drank the hemlock when he was supposed to have said: ‘I should have stuck to music’ - or something to that effect.

The growth and spread of literacy engaged more left brain activity and heightened the tension between knowing the world as a hard fact and understanding it subconsciously in terms of myth and metaphor. Descartes, in the 16th century, solidified the division between a rational mind and our bodily experience. With the Age of Enlightenment (the Age of Reason) from the 18th century we progressed to modernism and the growth of science, bringing an even stronger demand for certainty. Then, with post-modernism, McGilchrist wrote, ‘meaning drains away.’

He believes that our perception of art has gradually become more self-conscious, seeing what our superficial mind thinks is depicted or should be there rather than the work itself. This is especially true of music which typifies our increasing reliance on self-perpetuating technology – a lot of today’s music sounds, or is, machine-made. Intellectual, consciously-derived art is glib and comforting and seems to fit with an age of complacency and inauthenticity.

Roger Scruton is even more challenging in his remarks about the diminishing awareness of beauty in the world. He says that without conscious attention to beauty we experience desecration by default. To attend to beauty we need to direct our attention away from selfish gratification towards something that makes us feel good about ourselves and our fellow humans. All our addictions, in which he includes pornography, stem from living in selfish fantasy and it’s hard to escape the ‘stimulus addiction’ that is the stock-in-trade of TV and other mass media today. Scruton deplores the realism of modern action films that he thinks are designed to produce an immediate emotional effect without much need for imagination. To find meaning you need more than immediate effect

because you need to appreciate the context. I don't think that modern movies and adventure games necessarily lack beauty altogether and I also trust in the ability of the evolving mind, particularly of younger people, to find new ways to preserve the biological process whereby we obtain real meaning.

The arts stimulate our imagination because our mind is searching for value and then the quality of our looking influences what we are likely to see. Our experiences depend, not just on what it is that we look at, but the way we choose to look at it. Whenever you approach things with reverence the best things seem to come forward to greet you. If you are aware of the good in other people as you relate to them it is more likely that the good in them will come out in your relationship. This is the kind of association between attention and awareness that I feel I didn't explain very well earlier.

I've been watching some video presentations about mindfulness meditation that came along online and one of the speakers – a man called John Yates who is a Buddhist neuroscientist in America – was talking about the need for both attention and awareness. He says there is an Awareness Deficit Disorder today that is more important than attention deficit. Attention informs our awareness, but the reverse is equally true. Haphazard experience of either of these adversely affects the other, but too much emphasis on one or the other is not helpful either. His definition of mindfulness practice is to optimise the interaction between attention and awareness. Everything our mind does involves the interaction of these two. I often feel that some left-brain-oriented mindfulness experts put too much emphasis on achieving mind control rather than strengthening and nourishing the mind as a whole. This relates to the balanced use of both sides of our brain so that we can focus on details, but appreciate the context as well.

BREAK

Appreciating the arts is not separate from our primary task of enjoying relationships. In fact the extraordinary intimacy that we humans have evolved probably came about because we were also developing our artistic instincts.

The way that intimacy evolved along with the creative arts is a favourite subject of Ellen Dissanayake who wrote *Art and Intimacy - How the Arts Began* and several other books on this theme. She united the notions of intimacy (or love) and art (the arts) by exploring their common origins in our biology. She is an American who has lived in Sri Lanka, New Guinea and several African nations and she chooses not to call herself an anthropologist, though that has been her main field of study.

Her idea is that love is expressed and exchanged through emotionally meaningful patterns of social engagement that she called 'rhythms and modes,' beginning with the mother-infant relationship. Through these repetitive interactions (looks, sounds and touches) a human being learns to love and to be loved and also to create works of art that also consist of rhythms and modes. Love and art are both invitations to play and are welcomed as such.

Dissanayake described five stages of development for our human mind which show what love and art have in common. The first stage is what she called *mutuality*. In our first experience of mutuality the joyful exchange of 'baby talk' is a form of poetry and music which shapes the development of the baby's brain and mind. The exaggerated facial expression is the beginning of the many rituals of connecting that characterise our adult life as well. Sustained eye contact is such a powerful element of social engagement that it is normally only tolerated intermittently, often at the beginning and end of bits of conversation, but new mothers and new lovers are the obvious exception. Mutuality is an 'emotional concordance' between mother and child. Thus it leads to the next stage,

which she called *belonging*.

Humans form close-knit cultural groupings that provide safety and strength through the pooling of efforts and a stable framework within which we can each develop our self-identity as a person who belongs. Dissanayake studied many groups that we call 'tribal' where these 'nodes of culture' are more obvious than in our own society. She described how these communities are actually constructed through ceremonies and rituals that allow the expression of shared values and manners of living. Ceremonies involve music, movement and decoration which are forms of art. Without these it would be hard to establish or appreciate the shared meaning and the shared values.

The third stage she called the *making of meaning* and here she emphasised the importance of the stories that hold our meaning together. Our mind is structured by stories about our origin in relation to the natural world and the kinds of things that happen to us. Children love to hear the same story over and over again, told in the same way; adults do, too, though we are less likely to admit it.

Dissanayake called the fourth stage *hands-on competence*. I've already mentioned how important our hands are for our mind. A mother will often take or touch her new baby by the hand and an admiring relative may want to take the baby's finger in his hand and move it gently about to say 'you are one of us.' Our humanness is seen most clearly in our hands and faces. Hands are our primary instruments for making anything so they are at the root of our feeling of competence, that we can do things. Children become very absorbed in making things and, traditionally, this would be interacting with the natural world, but nowadays it is less so. There are several new books about the alienation of children (and adults) from the natural world now that pressing buttons or stroking silver screens are the most common ways our hands are employed.

The fifth and final stage is called *elaboration*. After we have attained some mutuality, belonging, meaning and competence, the peculiarly human characteristic that drives our art is that we still want to embellish it, to refine it and make it a little better. It is our nature to reach beyond where we are at present, seeking fulfilment by extending our expression of ourselves. The makers of prehistoric stone tools appear to have spent far longer than was functionally necessary in shaping these objects; they 'lingered over their handiwork.'

The rhythms and modes of ceremony and art differ from ordinary behaviour in that they elaborate, that is they add something to the value, they refine the meaning. Vocal elaboration is an example; we don't just say prayers, we like to sing them. Ceremonies are always systematic to help us feel secure, but they are not fixed as if choreographed by a computer, they are creative adventures that delight in curiosity and novelty. Many people like to watch famous weddings and funerals on the TV today because, even though you know what's going to happen, you're not sure exactly how it will unfold on this occasion.

Dance and song, colour and shape, stimulate our imagination because we search for value. We can't say exactly what it is, but we search for it as a source of meaning. Alfred North Whitehead wrote that art impels us to reach out to something beyond ourselves; it points to something other than what it is itself. He called it 'the realisation of values extending beyond its former self.'

Whatever the unknown or the ultimate truth might be we look towards the sublime in our experience to search for meaning. John Keats, whose life spanned only 25 years, wrote in an *Ode to a Grecian Urn*:

*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.'
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*