

The mysticism of wide open eyes by Michael Edwards

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Three months before his death from pancreatic cancer in 1994, the British playwright Dennis Potter was interviewed for the BBC by broadcaster Melvyn Bragg. In obvious pain and taking regular swigs from a bottle of liquid morphine, Potter explored a wide range of questions about his work, politics, family and feelings—given that he was already in the terminal stage of his illness.

I was spellbound by the raw honesty and energy of his answers, but there was one section that catapulted me into a different state entirely. It came when Potter described the plum tree blossom outside his study window:

“Looking at it, instead of saying ‘Oh that’s nice blossom’...I see it is the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there ever could be, and I can see it. Things are both more trivial than they ever were, and more important than they ever were, and the difference between the trivial and the important doesn’t seem to matter. But thenowness of everything is absolutely wondrous, and if people could see that, you know, there’s no way of telling you; you have to experience it, but the glory of it, if you like, the comfort of it, the reassurance...the fact is, if you see the present tense, boy do you see it! And boy can you celebrate it.”

I knew immediately what he meant. Potter had a complicated relationship to religion, and he didn’t use overtly spiritual language to describe his experience that day, but that’s how I felt it. He went on to say that this new state of consciousness had given him more clarity and serenity, along with the ability to stay fully focused in every moment. “Almost in a perverse sort of way”, he told Bragg, “I can celebrate life” so close to death.

These feelings of joy, compassion, clarity and connection are characteristic of mystical experience, but Potter’s story raises an intriguing question: why wait so long to enjoy the

fruits of a fully awakened life? Shouldn't we be living this way for as long as is possible, despite the constraints imposed by mortgages and college fees and all the drudgery of convention that surrounds us?

I've always thought so, and not just for personal reasons, though it's certainly more fulfilling—and more fun—to live a life that is deep instead of shallow. I think it also matters politically, because spirituality, a whole life lived in the way Potter was describing, is of enormous importance in the struggle for social change. This may sound odd given the common image of mystics as people who are removed from the world, but I'm convinced that spiritual experience is one of the keys to the radical transformation of society. How so?

First of all, unlike the received dogmas and hierarchies of religious and secular ideologies, spirituality can give us an actual experience of the unity of all things. This experience, when nurtured as a constant practice, roots equality-consciousness, non-discrimination, non-violence and reverence for all people and the earth deep into our core. Here is the American writer and mystic Thomas Merton describing how this happened to him:

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed by the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness."

Before this experience, Merton led a fairly conventional spiritual life in a Trappist monastery in Kentucky; afterwards he poured his energies into writing and speaking about poverty, racism, violence and war—and anything else that fractured that experience of unity, equality and reverence. But he continued his spiritual journey as a semi-hermit, moving to a separate cabin on the monastery grounds. This simultaneous turning in and turning out is characteristic of socially-engaged spirituality, repeated in figures like Dorothy Day and Angela Davis. The German feminist theologian Dorothee Soelle called it "the mysticism of wide open eyes."

Secondly, all spiritual paths involve the destruction or sublimation of the ego, and a surrendering to something greater than oneself—whether that's defined in terms of the 'divine,' or unconditional love, or artistic ecstasy, where even the plum tree outside your study window shimmers with meaning, grace and beauty. When our decision making is dominated by fear, jealousy, greed and other limitations of the ego, the economic and political systems we create will feed from and reproduce those qualities. By contrast, the ultimate security and generosity that flow from spiritual experience can anchor systems based on sharing and equality like nothing else.

Of course, kindness, joy, love and liberation don't unlock the doors of structural oppression by themselves. They have to be connected to political analysis and concrete plans for action, but those plans can easily be pulled back into destructive, ego-led behavior that disguises self-interest as radical or altruistic. Spirituality won't make you a Democrat or a Republican or reveal a detailed plan for health care reform, but it can place you in a qualitatively different state from which you can act in more expansive and clear-minded ways. I think that's what Potter meant when he celebrated 'life in the present tense:' concentrate on 'right action' as Buddhists call it in the here and now and always. Don't get locked into the patterns of the past or lose yourself in your ambitions for

the future.

Thirdly, although spiritual experiences are often spontaneous, sustaining their benefits requires practice, rigor and discipline, and those things are crucial in the struggle for social change. Classical practices include prayer, yoga and meditation, but music, art and dance can be powerful doorways too, along with loving interactions with other people—solidarity can be a spiritual experience in itself. Over the last ten years it's become fashionable to use these practices as tools to promote personal health and wellbeing, financial success, sexual conquest and even the corporate bottom line: "mindfulness opens the doorway to loving kindness," says Google's 'head of mindfulness training,' "which is at the heart of business success."

Spirituality is no stranger to this kind of appropriation, which is why the rigor and self-sacrifice involved in authentic spiritual growth is so important—it helps to weed out distractions and keep you on the straight and narrow. Spirituality is not a self-help strategy designed to make you feel happy in the world as it is. There's no such thing as 'comfortable compassion,' because a truly compassionate life—lived through the daily operations of economics, politics, activism, social relations and the family—is exceptionally demanding. It often involves internal breakdown and reconstruction, along with the constant practice of 'do no harm.'

This is painful, long-term work, but it's essential to keep on going, however 'liberated' you may feel. After all, slippage is characteristic of well-intentioned action: the rising stars of progressive politics who become co-opted along the way; the NGOs and foundations whose radical edges are eroded over time; the social movements that slowly take on the behavior of their oppressors; and the paragons of Corporate Social Responsibility that constantly fall from grace

Does this kind of rigor and discipline have to be mystical or spiritual? If you recoil at such language and the baggage it sometimes carries then never fear, you're in good company. Here's the radical writer, activist and lifelong atheist Barbara Ehrenreich trying to explain experiences that were "so anomalous, so disconnected from the normal life you share with other people that you can't even figure out how to talk about it...without sounding crazy." Just like Potter, Ehrenreich saw a new world in a tree:

"I was looking at a tree, and then it happened. Something peeled off the visible world, taking with it all meaning, inference, association, labels and words....Was it a place that was suddenly revealed to me? Or was it a substance—the indivisible, elemental material out of which the entire known and agreed upon world arises as a fantastic elaboration?"

Ehrenreich was 17 at the time, and she didn't return to her quest for meaning as she calls it until she reached middle age. But then she was able to apply her experiences to her activism and writing. And that's the point: it doesn't matter what you call them; what matters is that you're open to experiences like these so that you can utilize their gifts—preferably before your middle age and certainly before your death.

One could argue that—however it's described—no such experience is required to be effective as a vehicle for social transformation, but that seems unpersuasive to me: my ego is far too clever to dissolve itself or illuminate the way ahead free of the shadow of self-interest. By contrast, I've found that connecting spirituality to social action reveals a greatly expanded set of possibilities for personal-political change, so why wait to take

advantage of them?

'We believe in life before death' as an old Christian Aid slogan put it when I was growing up. It seems a shame to waste an opportunity as wonderfully fruitful as that.