

Authenticity

By George Boeree

Awareness

There are three qualities of character which I believe help us to better actualize: Awareness, freedom, and compassion. First, awareness:

By awareness I mean not just consciousness but a special capacity for full consciousness, open to all that is available to it and capable of discriminating what is immediate from what is constructed. To have awareness does not mean to avoid social constructs or personal ones or the use of symbols or words -- only to know these things for what they are and to use them appropriately. And conversely, awareness means having a particular capacity for experiencing immediately reality fully and clearly.

Awareness also means presence, that is, "being-in-the-present," the ability to focus on the here-and-now and to understand the past, whether in the form of memories or second-hand information, and the future in the form of hopes and intentions, as being of a different quality than the present. Again, this is not to say that the aware person must avoid memories, ignore history, deny responsibilities, suppress fantasies, and so on. They must, in fact, be aware of the past and future, but as such, without confusing them with immediate reality.

Awareness also means being aware of both the "objective" side of things and the "subjective" side, the world and the self. It means being aware of feelings, of needs, of values and attitudes and wishes and so on. People who pride themselves in their "realism" and "logic" often believe that others have trouble seeing what is real, and sometimes they may be right. But logical and realistic people tend to denigrate the value of internal -- i.e. "non-objective" -- events. Hence, they are unaware of the values of things when, in fact, everything we are conscious of has value (positive or negative) by definition.

We have, all of us, experienced immediate reality. We do so, if only fleetingly, every day. We once did so quite fully, when we were infants and did not yet have the layers of constructed realities we have now. As children and adults, we still experience immediate reality whenever we are totally absorbed in what we are doing. Children, when they are coloring and their tongues peak out of the corners of their mouths, are in immediate consciousness. So are people absorbed in music or music-making, flying an airplane, climbing a mountain, playing a sport or game, watching a good movie, reading a good book, focusing on some tricky piece of workmanship, making love, and so on and so on. An aware person finds him or herself in these states more often than others do, and seeks them out!

There are techniques that aid one in promoting awareness. One is meditation. There are innumerable forms of meditation, but one stands out as an example of what I am talking about, and that is mindfulness, as practiced by Buddhist monks and nuns. In mindfulness meditation, the practitioner attempts to "simply" experience each event, whether internal or external, as it happens without forming any attachments to it, i.e. without losing the stance of being prepared to experience each event without attachment! In other words, you hear the faucet drip or the clock tick or the voices outside, you let each sound have its moment, and you let it drift away into nothingness.

Likewise, you think your thought or imagine your imagining without getting "caught up" in it. You let a thought come in, you let it go away, just watching it come and go. You might begin by imagining yourself as an egg-shaped surface upon which certain events occur. Eventually, the surface will disappear -- and so will "you." That is, perhaps, the key feature of immediate experiencing: the absence of "self-consciousness." The focus is on experience, not on the experiencer.

Another technique for heightening awareness is phenomenological description. While making an effort to describe, fully and accurately, what is "there," whether it be a physical event or a mental state or whatever, and in turn suspending all commentary and effort at explanation, we learn to "see" more clearly.

What I believe people need most is to be released from the domination of their social constructs, which can only be done if they learn to recognize those constructs for what they are. This is best accomplished by experiencing social constructions -- or idiosyncratic constructions -- other than your own. Experience with other cultures and unique individuals, even if only through art and literature, forces us to re-evaluate our own beliefs: Are they what they are or are they the results of reifying our constructions?

Freedom

The preceding leads quite naturally to the next topic, which is freedom: If you become aware of other perspectives besides your own, you are freed from your perspective. You are no longer bound by it, it no longer determines your responses. It is crucial to our growth to be free from any single cause-effect, stimulus-response mechanism, however much that mechanism may have helped in the past, and to be free to investigate as many views of a situation as we can, in order to choose what is best for us.

Freedom is really a matter of using resources instead of following dictates. We have so many sources of information about what is best for us, so many sources of values: Our genetic inheritance, by means of instinct and the conditioning of pain and pleasure, tells us what has worked over the eons of evolution. Our society, by means of sanctions, modeling, and symbolic learning, tells us what has worked over thousands of years of cultural history. Reason, experiment, and the creation and testing of models corrects the course set by instinct and social habit. The awareness of perspectivity corrects and adds to them all.

Freedom has its roots in the imagination, which in turn has its roots in the dream. Imagination is the ability to create an anticipation of reality while holding off comparison of that anticipation with reality. The dream is the natural example. But sometimes we anticipate and the world fails to meet that anticipation. For a very brief moment, the anticipation hangs before us as an image. We can see what did not actually happen!

We later learn to create and hold those images intentionally. We learn to expect -- hold on to an anticipation over a long period of time -- as we might expect a desert after dinner or a degree at the end of our studies. We can learn to manipulate these expectations with little concern for how well they will or will not match with our reality. We learn to negate, to intentionally imagine the opposite of what we ordinarily anticipate. We fantasize and we take our fantasies and act to make them real, and so create a world that follows our anticipations, instead of our anticipations always following the world.

All this, given that we don't become absorbed in our fictions, but instead use them to promote actualization! Paradoxically, the very talent that can set us free is also what can bind us to social reality.

As you can see, although the potential for freedom is in each of us, the realization of freedom depends enormously on learning. Children must be given a chance to imagine, to be negative (even contrary!), to create their own goals and make and act on their own decisions. That much seems obvious.

But they must also learn "will power" or self-discipline, the ability to wait, to delay gratification. They must learn to pause, to stop for a moment their involvement in the stream of events to consider their anticipations. This pause frees us from causality.

It is the anticipatory image, frozen in the pause, held in imagination, that is at the root of freedom. It is also at the root of purpose. It is the way goals and projects and ends are created. And when one is working towards an end which one has projected, we might say, beyond oneself and the present time, one is free to make use of any means available and acceptable. We are no longer pushed from behind by drives or needs, biological or social. Necessity is taken away.

Once again, we are not free to do anything we please. We may imagine that we can fly, and we may choose to make the attempt. But, if we do so by flapping our arms, we will fall. There are even times when we cannot flap our arms when we so desire! But this is not a criticism of freedom, only of its universality. In fact, freedom doesn't make sense if it is not surrounded by causality. It is causality and the other qualities

of physical reality that allowed the Wright brothers to realize their dream of flying, and that allows any goal to be realized.

Neither am I saying that human beings are random or chaotic, only that we are not entirely determined. I am saying that we comprise a third quality regarding the sequencing of events: We are creative, and the primary product of our creativity is ourselves.

Compassion

So here we are, creatures that, ideally at least, are both aware and free. This only sounds easy. In fact, most people spend considerable efforts at avoiding both awareness and freedom, because these qualities cause a great deal of pain and anxiety. As forward-looking creatures, we see that we know very little to base our decisions on, and we are more often than not powerless to act on our decisions or to realize them.

And we note that ultimately, our awareness and freedom and self-actualization itself comes to naught: We die. As a creature that works in terms of purposes, we look for the grand purpose of our lives. We can see clearly that our purpose is to maintain and enhance the self. Yet the self is a poor bet in the long run.

The answer to the dilemma is to re-examine the idea of self-actualization. What is it we are trying to preserve and expand on? The self, in the sense of my personal conscious ego? Or the self in terms of this specific body? Or the self in terms of a specific set of memories or aspirations? Only a little bit of thought shows that these, while they may be our immediate concerns, are not the largest.

Our biological nature, for example, is concerned with the survival of bits of our DNA. Our social side, on the other hand, is interested in passing on certain cultural patterns. And these often operate so powerfully within us that we sacrifice our individual existence for the sake of our DNA or our society or, to put it more warm-bloodedly, our kin and our neighbors.

But “duty,” whether biological or social, isn’t enough either. We have this sense that, when we sacrifice for others, something important survives our sacrifice: Even if we don’t physically survive our sacrifice, there is a sense that what we truly are, the meaning of our existence, our very essence, does survive, and would not survive, in fact, except for this sacrifice. There is a sense that, when we choose not to show compassion, we are less than we were.

It is ironic that a person’s essence, which could never be communicated in the abstract, however many words we have at our disposal, can be communicated through a simple act of kindness.

One of the little dilemmas in life is that only we give things meaning, so only we can give ourselves meaning. But giving yourself meaning is a bit like pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. If the meaning you give is based on your own desire, your own perspectivity, then you have no meaning outside yourself. It’s pure narcissism, a sort of metaphysical masturbation -- temporarily satisfying, perhaps, but not sustaining.

The way out of this dilemma is to realize that the meaning to your life can be given to you by someone other than yourself. This is the great impetus towards a belief in God, but I believe that, even if one accepts a deity, it is more thoroughly experienced in the love between people.

To put it a bit simplistically, if you are needed, you are loved, and if you are loved, your life has meaning. But we mustn’t mistake this for something passive: We have to put forth considerable effort to maintain this mutuality of meaning. To be needed, you must give and continue to give.

Essentially, love is what you have when you feel as much or more concern for another’s actualization as you feel for your own. And we must emphasize that we are referring to a real concern for another’s true actualization, not a pretentious fuss made over what you want them to be. Much, perhaps most, of what passes for love is more a matter of self-serving control than true compassion.

Compassion is rooted in primitive empathy, the autistic tendency to experience another's needs, pains, and so on, as our own. We begin life as "life," without anywhere near the boundaries and dualities of latter life. So anyone's cry is my cry, anyone's laugh is my laugh. We still feel this when we walk into a room where people are having fun and we immediately brighten up, or when we grimace when another person falls.

Unfortunately, this empathy is a rather fragile affair. We avoid pain, and that makes good sense. So it makes even more sense to ignore those primitive whispers that would have us experience pain that is not even our own. Empathy is often beaten out of people at a very early age. Life is tough enough without it.

However, society has found good uses of its own for these empathic feelings, and often tries to support it. In happy families with healthy natures and fair means, empathy is supported and expanded upon. The key is quite obvious: If you are loved as a child, you stand a better chance of being able to express love to others later.

Please note how different this compassion is from conventionality, despite surface similarities. The conventional person may act compassionately, but they are only following the social rules they fear to disobey. In fact, societies, although they may encourage compassion, cannot enforce it by means of social rules. Even an idealistic ideology (such as Marxism first appeared to be) cannot create compassion, just as you cannot, as the saying goes, legislate morality. Compassion can only come out of freedom. Forcing compassion ironically encourages selfishness!

There is one more way in which compassion fits into some of our earlier discussions: Remember that pleasure comes from a movement away from individual consciousness, and that we experience immediate consciousness when we are so engrossed in something that we lose track of ego. Perhaps the most common and natural way we have of enjoying what we could call un-self-consciousness is when we lose our individual ego in our love for another, as we do when we look into a lover's eyes, or a child's.

The world of quality, you will recall, exists outside as well as inside particular perspectives. When we share a concern, when our desires merge, we share perspective. We share consciousness, not in some parapsychological fashion, but simply and immediately, if only briefly. In this way, we need not ever feel alone. And someone with sufficient breadth of perspective may feel one with humanity or even life, not as a mere intellectual expression, but as an immediately experienced truth.