

The Unexpected. What Is Our Achilles Heal? “Vast Realms of Consciousness still Undreamed of”.

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Theme: [History](#)

Global Research, February 10, 2024

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Despite calendars and clocks and all the mental gymnastics we use to control life and time, surprises are at the heart of existence. This may seem like a truism, but if so, it is one of those truths we often avoid in our desire for stability and the quelling of anxiety. Our expectations, a form of knowledge based on the past, are efforts to avoid pain and the joy of the new. They are often scarecrows to frighten away reality, as Ortega y Gasset put it. Habits of mind meant to forget that life is an experiment yet to be tried or known; that tomorrow is always unknown country. That death is the greatest surprise of all.

The English psychoanalyst Adam Philips writes in *Side Effects*:

The fact of death has made us addicted to prophecy, and to its secular equivalent, predictability; and therefore to a strange relationship to time. The fact of conception could make us more wedded to randomness and accident [I would say mystery]. Surprise could replace mourning as our preferred depth-charge.

I was thinking of this recently when I awoke to read about an outstanding professional athlete who was injured at the top of his game the night before. A shock to be sure, disappointing and depressing, yet not unheard of in the world of sports. He ruptured his Achilles tendon. Now his rehabilitation will offer him a chance to embrace the challenge and

meditate on the vagaries of life. Sometimes we discover in difficult circumstances that courage and determination are central to our characters, as I think is the case with this young man who has overcome other challenges.

Sports in themselves are not important. They are fun to play and are big business, but who wins or loses the games doesn't matter in any significant way. They are forgettable trifles, and as the word sport's etymology tells us – *desporter* (Old French from Latin), to divert, amuse, carry away – they divert us from more serious matters. And while they can amuse and entertain us, they can also get us to muse about the nature of play and the significance of surprises along life's way. How life itself is a play, in many meanings of the word.

Key to Freud's genius, much of which he learned from the poets who understood that the free flow of words was a key to human liberation, was his invention of the therapeutic method of free association.

To freely associate is to open one's mouth to hear yourself say the unexpected.

It is to step out of the cage of convention, to exit that play to play at catching a different form of consciousness. The possibility of freedom inherent in Freud's idea is no doubt one reason why he has come under continual attack in recent decades. Nor is it an accident that we are living at a time when free speech is under assault by all shades of authoritarians who fear what people might say and whom they may associate with. Freedom is dangerous. Individuals, not just in psychotherapy but in social life, need to talk freely but are often fearful to do so. They may surprise themselves privately and publicly, and that is why speech must be controlled by the authorities, those outside and the cop inside.

It is also why great artists are in short supply today and art is under assault, for great art threatens safety while always venturing into unknown territory. To think that a book is brilliant because *The New York Times* calls it a bestseller – which seems to be the case for most new books on library shelves these days – is as naïve as to consider that newspaper of record a bastion of good journalism.

It is hard when caged in cells controlled by authoritarians to encounter the unexpected. Formulaic writing of all sorts is widespread. It is part of a larger spell of total and instantaneous propaganda and a movement for elite social control under the guise of social improvement. What we euphemistically call mass communication is mass seduction, and the desire to be seduced is one old truth that still holds popular appeal.

Historically it has always been the poets, essayists, and novelists who have led the way into a freer world. While it is still true, to find their voices amid the cacophony of today's comingling of repetitive political, show business, and advertising rants is difficult. They have been marginalized, as have journalists who counter the propaganda of the corporate mainstream media. All has become show, the business of creating perpetual distractions from what is important.

"The modern version of hell is purposelessness," wrote the English novelist John Fowles in a brilliant essay accompanying photographs of individual trees in an oddly titled book about trees, *The Tree*. While ostensibly writing about trees, Fowles writes about the need to get lost, to literally wander through the green chaos of forests and the mental greenwood of our psyches without a planned route – purposeless. He writes about art and the art of life as analogous to wandering through a dense woodland and stumbling in wonder upon a hidden

treasure, something akin to Tolstoy's green stick that contains the secret to happiness, no matter how brief. He argues that it is because so much of the natural surround is useless that there is so much hostility toward it. Everything and everyone has become commodified, and only valued for their use value. Science, as opposed to art, seeks to categorize and control us and nature; to impose on our minds the idea that nature is outside us, separate, alien territory to enter only with a map and shield. The wild green man or woman, open to the flow of experience, to wandering, to the serendipitous, the unexpected is a dangerous outlaw. That the woods have long represented places of freedom to our ancestors in fact and in fiction is not just because life was more rural then but because the wild world hidden among trees corresponds to needs of the soul. Fowles compares trees, the woods, walking planless through them, as the best analogue of prose fiction:

All novels are also, in some way, exercises in attaining freedom – even when, at an extreme, they deny the possibility of its existence. Some such process of retreat from the normal world – however much the theme and surface is to be of the normal world – is inherent in any act of artistic creation, let alone that specific kind of writing that deals in imaginary situations and characters. And a part of that retreat must always be into a 'wild,' or ordinarily repressed and socially hidden, self: into a place always a complexity beyond daily reality, never fully comprehensible or explicable, always more potential than realized; yet where no one will ever penetrate as far as we have. It is our passage, our mystery alone, however miserable the account that is brought out for the world to see or hear or read at second-hand.

I would say it is also the best analogue of living. Sitting still too much is the real sin against the Holy Ghost, said Nietzsche, who was a great walker "on lonely mountains or near the sea where even the trails become thoughtful." And he was not alone. Thoreau, Rimbaud, D. H. Lawrence, Rousseau, Gandhi, et al. knew that only by getting off your ass and putting it behind you might you discover something new, an unexpected treasure only available to an outsider with no expectations, no plans, having relinquished control.

Speaking of control and planning, even with the best intentions, I am reminded of a lake with a little beach opposite woods up the hill from where we live and often walk. Since September 11, 2001 this town has been massively gentrified with mansions and upscale stores and venues. It has become a magnet for wealthy urbanites who have fled in fear from the New York/New Jersey area to this small town 130 miles north. Now the small rustic beach with its bumpy dirt parking lot and the road along the lake are being converted into a replica of all the imitative city greenways that have sprouted up across the country. Huge numbers of trees have been felled, an expanded asphalt parking lot is being constructed, and the road converted from cars to walkers, leading from the town's choice neighborhood on the hill. This construction project is symbolically creating a gated community without a fence. Anyone having to drive to the beach will have to come from the other direction to the parking lot, directing all car traffic through that poorer neighborhood and part of town. All this in the name of saving the lake and making life better for the locals. But better primarily for wealthier residents, who now will have their own one way access to the area and much less traffic passing their way.

It is a good example of what Philip Slater wrote about in his 1970 book, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*. Slater was writing about the rise of totalitarian tendencies in the U.S. as the U.S savagely bombed Vietnam and Cambodia [read Iraq, Gaza, Yemen, Syria, Russia, etc.], when the fear of the poor was widespread and wealth and power idolized, consumerism reigned supreme, and privatization was being

carried out under the benevolent mask of an inchoate neo-liberalism that has since become a full-fledged monster.

And he was holding a mirror up to “the grim monotony of American facial expressions [read masks] – hard, surly, and bitter – and by the aura of deprivation that informs them.” Central to this was the fanatical acquisitiveness of his compatriots and the fading of stable local neighborhoods where different social classes could flourish together. “It is difficult to become reaccustomed to seeing people already weighted down with possessions acting as if every object they did not own were bread withheld from a hungry mouth,” he wrote, upon returning from overseas. Deep-rooted social problems were being avoided by being flushed away under the guise of superficial improvements – what he called “the toilet assumption”: “the notion that unwanted matter, unwanted difficulties and obstacles will disappear if they are removed from our immediate field of vision.” In the name of social control, the country was coming apart. As is true now, the prettification of social spaces was serving as an unintentional pursuit of loneliness where the wealthy sophisticates and the “deplorables” would occupy separate worlds and their separate symbols [read Trump and Biden] would engage them in heated pseudo-debates.

What is our Achilles’s Heal?

I suggest it is our rupture from nature symbolized in our efforts to control experience through planning. In Goethe’s *Faust* this is flipped so that Goethe’s ultimate salvation and happy ending is tied to his land reclamation project from the sea – engineering – and the conquest of nature. While such planning obviously has its place, it has become a modern paradigm that serves as a solution to so many of life’s problems [technological fixes] and a hedge against surprising discoveries. Only when one is willing to get lost, can one stumble upon Tolstoy’s green stick of happiness and discover truths that authoritarians try to deny us.

The poet’s truth, as always.

Terra Incognita

By D. H. Lawrence

There are vast realms of consciousness still undreamed of
vast ranges of experience, like the humming of unseen harps,
we know nothing of, within us.
Oh when man has escaped from the barbed-wire entanglement
of his own ideas and his own mechanical devices
there is a marvellous rich world of contact and sheer fluid beauty
and fearless face-to-face awareness of now-naked life
and me, and you, and other men and women
and grapes, and ghouls, and ghosts and green moonlight
and ruddy-orange limbs stirring the limbo
of the unknown air, and eyes so soft
softer than the space between the stars,
and all things, and nothing, and being and not-being
alternately palpitant,
when at last we escape the barbed-wire enclosure
of *Know Thyself*, knowing we can never know,

we can but touch, and wonder, and ponder, and make our effort
and dangle in a last fastidious fine delight
as the fuchsia does, dangling her reckless drop
of purple after so much putting forth
and slow mounting marvel of a little tree.

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This article was originally published on the author's website, [Behind the Curtain](#).

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