

Culture and Ideology Are Not Your Friends

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I used to prepare these things in anticipation of vast oceans of faces eager to be uplifted. Since the oceans of faces are, practically speaking, more like small ponds, I've realized that these are really conversations around and about one subject only, which is: what in the world is going on? What does it mean to be incarnate in a human body at the end of the 20th century in a squirrely culture like this, trying to make sense of your heritage, your opportunities, the contents of the culture, the contents of your own mind? Is it possible to have an overarching viewpoint that is not somehow canned, or cultish or self-limited in its approach? In other words, is it possible to cultivate an open mind and sanity in the kind of society and psychological environment that we all share? It grows daily and weekly harder to do this, weirder to integrate, there's more on your plate to assimilate. I certainly don't have final, or even nearly final answers. I think it all lies in posing the questions in a certain way, in feeling the data in a certain way, and one of the things that I try to convince people is that it's not necessary to achieve closure with this stuff, and in fact any ideological or belief system that offers closure — meaning final answers — is sure to be wrong, sure to be self-limiting, sure to be inadequate to the facts.

So, one of the ideas I'd like to put out is that — and it may seem strange in this venue, but perhaps not — ideology is not our friend. It is not a matter of choosing from a smorgasbord of ideologies and rejecting the flawed, the self-contradictory and the over-simple in favor of the unflawed, the complex enough. Where is it writ in adamantite that semi-carnivorous monkeys can or should be capable of understanding reality? That seems to me one of the first illusions and one of the more prideful illusions of human culture: that a final understanding is possible. Better, I think, to try to frame questions which can endure and leave off searching for answers, because answers are like operating systems: they're being upgraded faster than you can keep up with.

I want to mention just a couple of things that are happening to sort of set the context. This is the stuff I worry about or think about. In the last ten days, a new solar system with three giant planets has been discovered. This

is a multiple-planet solar system around Upsilon Andromedae, 44 light-years away. What does that mean to us? Well, it means that solar systems like our own are probably as common as popcorn on a theater floor. There's no reason to think not. In fact, right now we know of twenty planets outside the solar system — twice as many as we know inside the solar system — so we're living in a different world than everybody was living in even five years ago. Science is lifting veils and opening doorways on a universe so vast, so strange, so counterintuitive that it's literally all you can do to keep up. Here's another factoid: there are now more square miles of territory in virtual reality than the entire surface of the earth. Virtual reality is now larger than this planet. I don't know if you spend much time in VR; I spend a little time there. I was looking at AlphaWorld before I left Hawaii. The opening screen is from 25,000 feet above AlphaWorld; the entire thing cannot fit on the screen. Denver would fit on the screen at an altitude of 25,000 feet, you could see the outlying suburbs, but AlphaWorld won't fit, that's how large a single world of virtual reality is, and there are hundreds, if not thousands, being built, being expanded, being edited and changed as we speak.

We're now just a hair's breadth away from there being six billion people on this planet. Again, I checked on the internet before I left — we're something like a hundred million short. By the time I get back to Hawaii in a month, we'll be over the six billion mark. Then, just to touch on a few things: the strongest hallucinogen known to science is legal, free and easily grown, totally unlimited in its distribution — I'm talking about *Salvia divinorum*. Quantum teleportation has been achieved and is moving out of the laboratory and probably in the next half dozen years will be the basis of an entirely new kind of computational machine with greater computing capacity than all the computers presently operating in North America. Had I had more time I could just keep going with this laundry list of shockers. The human world is exploding at the seams. Human creativity and the implementation of human inventions and technologies is now at an accelerated fever pitch like nothing ever before seen in the history of the world. Well, where is it leading, and how does one integrate this stuff into one's life? What does it mean about the experience of being human?

If you've followed the evolution of my ideas, you'll know that I have proposed the existence of an invisible, permeating *something* that is throughout all being, all time, all space, all bodies, all thoughts, which I call novelty; and the interesting thing about novelty is that it's increasing constantly. Science has not trumpeted this view, because science tends to look for principles which operate in definable domains — in other words, the laws of chemistry, the laws of physics, the laws of gene segregation, the laws that describe the trajectories of artillery shells and falling bodies — but I submit to you that there is an overarching law which affects all reality and that you don't need an atom smasher or extremely advanced mathematical methodologies to discern. It is self-evident in your own experience; it is that, as we go back in time, the universe is found to be a simpler place. If we go back a long ways in time, the universe is a very simple place: there are no cultures, there are no animals, there are no plants. Indeed, if we go far enough back in time, there are no stars and planets, the

universe is simply a swarming ocean of energy; but as we approach the present, it's as though the universe has undergone a series of crystallizations out of itself of higher and higher forms of organization, and this is what I call novelty.

People have attacked this concept, saying that it's impossible to define in English or mathematically. Most things that are interesting are impossible to define: love, courage, decency, dignity, hope, fear. It doesn't preclude them from shaping our world, and the absence of a mathematical definition of novelty shouldn't impede us greatly either, because it's an intuitively graspable concept. Novelty is complexity, it's connectivity, it's complex thermodynamic states that sustain themselves far from equilibrium. That's you, as a body; that's us, as a society; that's this planet, as a living ecosystem; and the interesting thing about this novelty is that any given level of it which is achieved becomes the platform for further advance into novelty.

Now, there is a retardant force, and I call it habit to keep it away from concepts like thermodynamic entropy. In my model of the way things work, the cosmos, your life, the politics of this city, the history of Western civilization, are a struggle between habit and novelty. Habit is also an intuitively graspable concept. It means conservatism, recidivism, doing things the traditional way, not taking chances; and these things are not moral values — sometimes the right move is habitual, sometimes the right move is novel — but the universe as a system is what I call a novelty-conserving engine. In other words, where novelty is produced it tends to be tenaciously hung onto. It can't always be hung onto, but it is tenaciously hung onto.

As an example of what I mean by “tenaciously hung onto”: 65 million years ago, as you know, an asteroid of considerable dimensions struck this planet and in a single day the dinosaurs, the great saurians, went extinct. Maybe it wasn't a single day, maybe it was weeks, but in terms of the timescale of the life of the earth it was a blink of an eye. That was a tremendous setback for novelty. These beautifully climaxed and integrated ecosystems of dinosaurs and rainforests and so forth were just pulverized to dust. It had taken four billion years for the planet to achieve that kind of novelty. 65 million years later, a fraction of the time it took the original system to establish itself, it's all good. The dinosaurs are gone forever, but in their place much more novel, much more interesting, much more complex animal and plant biota have established themselves. So what took four billion years to achieve, turned to rubble 65 million years ago, is back in place. This is because of this tendency for nature to prefer and conserve novelty. Somebody might resist this or they might have problems with it, but I think it's self-evidently true that this is the most complex age the universe has ever known, because we not only have all which preceded, but we have then our own dear selves: the poetry of William Blake, the mathematical equations of Albert Einstein, the paintings of Rembrandt; we have all of this to add into the mix.

What takes this out of the realm of sophomoric and theoretical discussion is the second part of my observations on novelty, and that is that novelty occurs faster and faster as you approach the present. In other words, this isn't that the universe is driving toward ultimate novelty at constant speed and has been

since the beginning of the universe; not at all! The universe is moving toward ultimate novelty, but following a kind of asymptotic spiral of closure, so that each advance into novelty is preceded by the next at an ever greater rate of what I call ingression into novelty — this is a phrase out of Alfred North Whitehead. What does that mean? It means that in the early universe it took a long time for things to get interesting, for things to go from being just a cloud of pure electron plasma to a universe with stars ordered into galaxies, with planets, with special chemistries and environments. From that came, at least on this planet, advanced life forms: first, simple life forms, then advanced life forms, then the conquest of the land, then extremely advanced life forms, minded creatures, language-using human beings, tool-using human beings, and then the frantic, hysterical rush from Altamira to this moment; and we are part of this. These vast cycles of advancement into novelty, which used to require aeons to affect the universe perceptibly at all, are now going on in humanly cognizable domains of time: the year, the month, the day, the decade, the century. We can look at such humanly cognizable spans of time and the overwhelming impression we have is of change, change piled upon change piled upon change.

If this process has been rolling forward like this since the birth of the universe some 13 billion years ago, it's very hard to hypothesize or argue that it should cease or will somehow deflect itself from its endless ramping-up of acceleration; but we can't imagine change going on much faster than it's going on now. Perhaps we can imagine it going on ten times faster or a hundred times faster, but a hundred thousand times faster? A million times faster? The mind boggles; and yet, I think this is, in fact, where the universe is going. Since the middle '70s I've had these ideas pretty much in place, and my faith has been that as science and human understanding advances I would either be thrown from the boat as a crank or somehow dragged into the fold. Well, I haven't been thrown from the boat as a crank. I'm not sure speaking at the Whole Life Expo indicates that I've been folded into the community of paradigmatic thinking, but I have received some encouragement in the last 18 months and I want to just mention this briefly to you, because I'm surprised how the news has failed us.

Did you know that in the last 12 months, a fundamental law governing the universe, in all its parts and places, has been discovered that was previously not only unsuspected but denied? A law of nature larger than any law of nature ever discovered, larger than the law of gravity, the speed of light, the second law of thermodynamics — all these are little laws, what Leary used to call local ordinances — these local ordinances have now been contextualized in a discovery of such import that it has not even been assimilated by the community of its discoverers, let alone handed down to the peasantry like you and I. What I'm talking about is the discovery of the cosmological constant Λ . I don't want to spend too much time on this, but here it is in a nutshell: the universe is expanding faster than the ordinary laws of physics can account for. This was realized a year and a half ago by one team of astrophysicists; they handed it on to a second team, they confirmed it; they handed it on to a third, they confirmed it; and a very counterintuitive picture of things is emerging. The universe is not going to fall back on itself in some grand crunch billions of years hence. Rather,

the universe is going to expand forever. But here's the kicker: faster and faster and faster, forever, with no barriers and no limitations. Someone might say, "Well, what about the speed of light?" The speed of light does not cover the law of the cosmological constant, because this law is not saying that matter is moving apart faster and faster. If that were the case, the relativistic physics would put a speed limit on it. It's saying that space itself is expanding faster and faster: this is a quality of empty space. The universe that comes into focus with this law in hand is a universe that in only a few billion years will begin to lose contact with large parts of itself, because they will be moving apart at greater than relativistic speed.

So it turns out there is a cosmic law which has built into itself this idea of an endless acceleration toward infinity, and what it means is that in a few billion years this area of space that we call our universe may be so diffuse that there may be no more than a handful of rattling electrons in the entire universe, so-called, today. The reason this gives me hope is because, in the first place, who wants to fall back into the big crunch? I mean, that's a really anti-novel thing, to have half the end life of the universe be the retracing of the first half, and I believe — these are bold generalizations, but generally substantiated — that nature is fractal in its structure. What that means is that a pattern occurring on a given scale can be expected to occur on other, very different scales. Simple example: an atom is a nucleus with electrons spinning around it; a solar system is a star with planets spinning around it; a galaxy is a huge black hole and agglomeration of stars within the outlying neighborhood spiralling around it. These are things on tremendously different scales, and yet they are organized similarly, and so I believe this is how nature works. Once she finds a pattern that works, she applies it in many domains of temperature, pressure and cosmic scaling.

This cosmological constant Λ , which says that the universe is expanding faster and faster, throws a kind of umbrella of political correctness over my notion that we are moving faster and faster into novelty, and that we are, as it were, simply the dust motes or the magnetic particles in the presence of some kind of field phenomenon which is organizing us to its will. This is the source of my optimism. If I had to place my faith in human institutions, human religions, human goodness, the human capacity for decency and dignity, I would be absolutely in the depths of existential despair, as I was as a kid. As a kid, I didn't have these ideas, I had Camusian existentialism and Nietzschean whining and all the rest of it, and it's a pretty grim situation, folks! But I really believe that without atom smashers, without long-base interferometers and all the rest of it, you can go into nature and open your eyes and open your mind and you will see these processes in play, and you can easily extrapolate them to your own life.

Now, if going into nature and opening your eyes and paying attention doesn't deliver this to you, then I suggest 20 milligrams of psilocybin be added into the mix, or 200 micrograms of LSD, and then I think it will come shining through. Why should that be necessary? Why should someone have to resort to what Rimbaud called "an artificial perturbation of the senses" to achieve

it? Simply because culture mitigates against it. Culture is a closed system of thinking and values of the sort I am denouncing. It is the greatest barrier to your enlightenment, your education and your decency. I realize, with joy, that here I skirt the bounds of political correctness, because everyone is running around saying, “Recapture your roots, get in touch with your Swedishness, your Irishness, your whateverishness,” and that’s all very fine, but I think it’s your humanness that may have eluded you in all this ethnocentric breast-beating. Why should culture imprison us and somehow place a barrier between ourselves and our true humanness? Well, I think I said at the beginning of this thing: culture and ideology are not your friends. This is a hard thing to come to terms with, because a certain kind of alienation lies at the end of this thought process. On the other hand, you can’t live in the cradle forever. You can’t be clueless forever, so somebody might as well just lay it out for you and say: culture is for the convenience of culture, not you. How many times have your sexual desires, career aspirations, financial dealings and aesthetic inclinations been squashed, twisted, rejected and minimized by cultural values? If you don’t think culture is your enemy, ask the 18-year-old kid who is given a rifle and sent to the other side of the world to murder strangers if culture is his friend.

These extreme examples should bring it home to us that culture is a kind of a con game. It is, in fact, strangely enough, a kind of virtual reality. We have been led to think of virtual realities as something on the screen of a computer or presented through a headset, but that’s an electronic virtual reality. The primary technology for the building of virtual realities is language. Once you start talking about race pride, loyalty, *our* destiny, *our* God, *our* mission, it’s like building virtual realities. People begin to treat these things as though they had the substantiality of real objects, and to build their lives as as though these things were real. What is this? It’s a diminution of humanness. You’re choosing to limit yourself to a cultural reality. Whether it’s the reality of being Witoto, or Orthodox Jewish, or whatever it is, it’s a smaller world than the simple hardware you were born into this universe with; and the substances, the drugs, the plants, the things which perturb consciousness, they don’t address cultural values, they blast through them. They address the animal body, the mammalian brain. They perturb these information fields outside of the relativistic set of values that culture is giving you. This is why people who yearn for legal psychedelics have not, in my opinion, thought deeply enough about what is really at stake here. Imagine a culture so certain of its primary values, so sure that it represented the right way to live, that it would encourage people to take psychedelic substances and examine its premises. There ain’t such a culture, at least not in the high-tech industrial democracies and/or the fascist states. Some aboriginal cultures have this courage, but it has kept them very close to the breast of nature and her processes. Cultures that have habitually broken down the cultural illusion and examined the terrifying reality beyond it have not then marched off to pontificate with the religions of absolutism, or scientific absolutism or all the rest of it.

Well, why is that? It’s because cultures are virtual realities made of language, and if there is one thing psychedelics do — whether you hate them or love them,

whether you don't give a hoot — they dissolve boundaries, the boundaries between you and the floor, between you and your friend, between you and you last week and you and you next week. They dissolve boundaries, that's what they do. That is the ultimate subversive behavior. Cultures are boundary-defining engines. That's what they do! They teach you, "We do it *this* way. Don't go there, in your mind, in your heart. Follow the rules." Cultures are like operating systems. At Ur, they set up a stela in the center of the marketplace and on the stela they carved the laws. These were the laws of the operating system called Ur 1.0, and that worked fine for a while. Now we're operating under Clinton's Second Term 4.0, and is it limiting? Is it idiotic? Is it a pain in the rear end? You bet it is!

How can we overcome the limitation of our operating system? Well, basically what I do with my computer when it acts up is I give it a good slap or a thump on the top, and that's what these psychedelics are doing; they are saying, "Get it in context, my dear primate. See, how does it all fit together?" Every culture in history, in every time and every place, has operated from the assumption that it had it 95% correct and that the other 5% would arrive in five years' time. All were wrong. We gaze back at their naivety with a faint sense of our own superiority. But *we* are wrong; we don't have it either. I mean, if this is a culture approaching the truth, who needs the truth? This is something very, very different.

Just to satisfy myself, I asked the question: Why should it be like this? Why should these psychedelics — which, granted, perturb the mind — be such a terrifying countercultural force? And what does that mean? Well, I think it works something like this: your sensory apparatus, connected up to your local language, is a very good threat detection device. That is really what the animal body evolved to be. We wouldn't be here if we weren't at the end of a long line of superb threat detection devices which told us when the saber-toothed carnivore was sneaking on its belly through the tall grass, which gave us that moment out of the corner of our eye when we saw the edge movement and scampered back into the cave. Ordinary consciousness has evolved an extraordinary fit to three-dimensional space and time, because that's where your *soma*, your meat, is. If the meat is disrupted radically, the mind is we don't know where; that's somebody else's lecture. It's very important to keep the physical body together. So the mind, under the influence of culture and cultural values, evolves as a threat detection device; but notice that, carried far enough, that ends in paranoia. In a sense, all cultural values, carried to their ultimate end, produce the paranoid personality: fearful, watchful, never resting, never sleeping, always looking for the worst in every situation.

The mind is like water: it takes the shape of the vessel into which it is poured, always. So when we approach the psychedelic plants — as shamans, as seekers, as sincere people interested in extraordinary experiences — what the psychedelics do, I think, is dissolve this three-dimensional threat detection psychology and system, and it's as though the mind discovers that it has a second conformational geometry, of a higher-dimensional order than ordinary consciousness. The psychedelic mind is a higher-dimensional mind. It is not

fit for three-dimensional space-time filled with roving, heavy-bodied carnivores, but it is fit for the back of the cave, the mountain retreat, the monastic tower: in other words, the place where threat has been eliminated and philosophy is the order of the day. I put this to Ralph Abraham, the mathematician, and we talked of this in relationship to DMT. He said, "I have no doubt at all that when I am flashing on DMT I am seeing the ordinary world from a higher-dimensional mathematical perspective." One of the things about higher dimensions is that the linearity of time is overcome and last week and next week are as easily available as the present moment. The front of my hand is as easily seen as the back of my hand without moving my hand if I am in hyperspace.

In a way, these higher dimensions are the places from which knowledge has percolated. Shamans are related to the smith, the worker in metal, the technologist, the toolmaker. The shaman is a master of fire, master of metals, maker of tools, seer into the future. The shaman is outside of cultural time and is channeling the future which is to come, in the form of technologies, innovations, languages, behaviors, so forth and so on. This is why the shaman has always been the paradigmatic figure for aboriginal cultures, because the shaman knows more. The method of the shaman has always been perturbation of consciousness, and not always psychedelic plants or substances. It can be putting metal hooks under your pectoral muscles and hanging for 14 hours in the sun, it can be abandonment in the wilderness, it can be extreme forms of fasting, it can be ordeal poisons. But people are not fools! All of these things are extremely risky and unpleasant, while the psychedelics are the most effective and the least invasive. I mean, let's take 30 milligrams of psilocybin, or a great fistful of mushrooms: three hours into it, you are definitely thrown into the lap of God. Eight hours into it, you're simply looking back on it, reflecting, drawing conclusions and wondering where you go from here.

This is a roundabout way of explaining that it's no surprise to me that society is very nervous around this issue, because society's eggs are all in one basket, and the psychedelically-inspired citizen or the psychedelically-inspired shaman is a dangerous force. Even in traditional societies, the shaman is central to social functioning but is never allowed to be physically central. There's a leader, a head man or something. The shaman lives off at the edge of the village, sometimes off in the woods. He is approached with fear and trembling. He is loathed and respected and feared and loved, because it is understood that he represents a dimension that nevertheless must be tolerated, because it is the channel through which knowledge and healing and higher values come.

In a society like ours, we have other methods. We don't need the ravings of intoxicated shamans. We have the scientific method, we have the Gospel, we have the Talmud, we have all of these things, and they are sufficient for us to guide ourselves. But to guide ourselves where? If the 20th century is a statement of the accomplishments of the Western mind, values and methods, then God help us, because the 20th century is a disgrace. It was so comfortable to look back at Auschwitz and say, "Well, the '30s, the '40s, Hitler, those gray, grainy movies, this has nothing to do with us. This is just some terrible thing that happened in Europe fifty years ago." No, no, no. This is happening as we

speak: people are being pushed into boxcars and taken away to be lined up and shot for no reason whatsoever, while glasses tinkle and toasts are made by those who define themselves as the preservers of freedom, dignity and Western values. We haven't learned anything. The 20th century is the most condemnatory piece of evidence you can place against the Western mind, and it seems to me that it's a knockout punch. I don't know who's responsible for this, but whoever is responsible is guilty, guilty, guilty of crimes against humanity.

How do we overcome this? How do we find real values? Well, we find them in caring for the earth. Nature presents an established set of processes and achievements, billions of years old, which exercise a moral claim on rational intelligence if it will but notice. That's what this is all about. It's about aboriginal values and aboriginal technologies — psychedelic drugs, shamanism, what have you — offering to us, in the final moments of our unravelment, a different and better way to carry on, a different and better way to behave and build a world. It doesn't come a moment too soon; it may come too late. The ultimate tragedy: imagine if we, in this ultimate kind of thanatotic struggle, actually got it right, only to understand that the momentum of our idiocy was so great that we would die knowing that we could have done it right, but we would die anyway. So it's a call to awakening: can cultural values be saved? I don't think so. I don't give a hoot. I mean, I'm an egg smasher. I think we should save the Rembrandts and the Piero della Francescas, but we cannot save the values: racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, product fetishism, enormous pyramids of class and privilege, none of this is worth saving. Science is worth saving, it's worth reforming, because it is, as a method, powerful, but in the presence of people contaminated by these other values it becomes an engine of madness, of consumer fetishism, of propagandizing, of the waging of war on unimaginable scales. Religion, as we have practiced it, I don't think can be saved, because what religion has given us are laundry lists of moral dos and don'ts that are preposterous on the face of them. I mean, if the people who preceded us believed all that, then this world is the consequence of those beliefs and this is hell.

If there's a message here, rather than just a rant, I think it would be to return to nature. Observe. Open your eyes. Get smart. Culture is not your friend. Religion is not your friend. The values of these cultures are fatal, and if we don't wrench the direction of human society into an entirely new way of doing things, the clock is ticking. Nature is unforgiving. Intelligence is a grand experiment, but if it does not serve novelty, diversity, and the production of love and community and true caring, who needs it? Better to have a universe that glorifies God through its diversity than a universe which is the travesty of a demonic intent. If you are not a psychedelic person and none of that appeals to you, that's fine too, that is not a requirement. What is a requirement is moral intelligence, and you have to get it, one way or another, in a hurry. The reason I speak for psychedelics is because that's the only thing I have ever seen work as fast as I think we need to have this change happen. If the Sermon on the Mount could have done it, we could have turned the corner then. We've had great teachers, and they were crucified, trampled, ignored, distorted, perverted.

The right idea is not enough. What is necessary is the lightning strike of true gnosis, however that can occur. I speak for the psychedelics because I have felt their impact personally and I have been with cultures that have stayed close to that campfire, and I have seen the beauty, the integrity and the humanness of those cultures. We know this, I think; it simply needs to be articulated and spread and made clear. It is the faith that nature's dynamic will carry us to the completion and the enlightenment that we seek.

I'm not saying that this culture is worse than being an Amazonian tribe. I'm saying that this culture is worse than being an Amazonian tribe, it's less than being an Amazonian tribe, unless we make use of it. In other words, it is not something to be preserved but something to be exercised as an opportunity. We are free, well-fed, well-educated, we have access to the great databases of the world. A certain responsibility comes with that. I don't expect the Witoto or the Bora or the Muinane or the Shuar to do more than set a good example for us. The breakthrough will probably come from the high-tech industrial democracies, because that's where there is the most latitude to experiment. The very fact that I can speak to you without being shot, the very fact that you can go home and apply my lessons with no more than a few years in prison hanging over your head, this is progress, folks! In Hawaiian culture, if you stepped on the king's shadow, they killed you immediately. Many, many aboriginal societies are more rule-nutty than we are. It's not about just creating a kind of anarchy, it's about using freedom to introduce other people to freedom and to then cultivate the things out of freedom that are most human.