

A Question of Empathy



*In recent items, such as A Change of Perspective, and A Return To My Beginning, you state that you have returned to your own, now much developed, philosophy called *The Numinous Way*. Can you give more details of your reasons?*

In relation to Islam, I realized that, yet again, I had been following an ideal - or rather, striving to find an ideal in something which was, like many religions and Ways, open to interpretation, and misinterpretation, and whose principles were sometimes, or often, ignored by people who claimed adherence to them, and which thus was, in essence, fallible. That is, I came to realize - from practical experience and studies lasting many years - that I was making the mistake I had made with Christianity, with Buddhism, with a political ideology, with many other Ways and *-isms*, which mistake was to place some abstraction, some ideal, before *being*, before life, and thus to wrongly strive to realize, to strive to make real, some abstraction, some ideal, by a striving to have life, and people, conform to, be restricted by, some ideal, some abstraction, some revelation, some *-ism* or some *-ology*. This, I came to understand, caused suffering; it was hubris, and thus un-ethical. That is, I came to consider, and strove to answer, ethical questions concerning the causes, and the cessation of, suffering, and how or even if honour was or could be related to the cessation of suffering.

I considered - as I had years ago in relation to first, Buddhism, and then Christianity - that only the natural, honourable, tolerant, empathic, reasoned,

Way which underlies what I have called The Numinous Way fully answered all the questions about the meaning and purpose of our lives. It seemed impossible to reconcile my belief in the importance of a personal, living, numinous, honour, and the overriding importance of Nature and a Cosmic identity, with the principles of Islam. Yet - and yet there was the question of honour, of the oath I had sworn, as a Muslim, to do my duty. This was Shahadah, the testimony of submission. Thus, I felt myself caught between dishonour and dishonour: between betraying the new understanding I believed I had achieved and which I sought to express through The Numinous Way, through poetry, and in some of the personal letters I wrote to friends, and between betraying that past oath of submission to a Deity.

Hence, through my diverse experiences, my diverse studies, I came to understand how the ethics of conventional religions are firmly based upon the morality of the individual; a morality which speaks of the reward for the individual in some after-life, or in the attainment of some-thing such as Nirvana. In contrast, it seems to me that my Cosmic Ethics are both revolutionary and evolutionary: for according to these new ethics, we do what we do not because we as individuals may be rewarded by some Supreme Deity, but because it is the human, the civilized, the empathic, the noble, the honourable, thing to do. Furthermore, I perceived the perspective beyond this world - toward the Cosmos itself, feeling that there probably was life elsewhere, and, sometimes, I would look at some of the beautiful photographs of the Cosmos taken by instruments such as the Hubble telescope and imagine world upon world of life in Galaxy after Galaxy. How foolish I, we, seemed; how primitive, how childish, for we were but one minute - one microcosmic - manifestation of life in one part of one Galaxy among millions upon millions of Galaxies.

Thus, and for a several years, I lived troubled by the human dilemma of honour - or, rather, troubled by the dishonour of rejecting an oath sworn before good, noble, people, and troubled by the dishonour of causing suffering in this life through propagating the Way of submission, to some supreme Deity, whose ultimate aim was beyond this mortal life, and which ultimate aim allowed for suffering of some or many in this mortal life because those so suffering might be rewarded, by a Deity, in an after-life.

But despite many and varied means of trying to accept this, my apprehension was not then inwardly, and now is not, of a Supreme Deity as such a Deity has hitherto been understood by both the revelations embodied in Christianity and Islam. Instead, my own intuition - which intuition I would later make conscious by means of my Numinous Way philosophy - was of a Cosmic Being: of how Nature, and we ourselves as rational, honourable, empathic, cultured beings, manifest or can manifest this Cosmic Being. Of how all life was connected; of

ourselves being a nexion to other life, to Nature, and to the Cosmos. Of how we exist on one planet circling one star among millions of stars in one Galaxy among a Cosmos of Galaxies. Of how we evolved, painfully slowly and in a natural way, toward reason, and honour and those other things which express our humanity, and how we still are tainted with our primitive, our barbaric, ancestry. Of how we can and should evolve further by preserving and developing those things which make us human, through a new culture, or many new cultures, with such a new empathic culture or cultures being the genesis of the type of society which really can begin the quest to explore the Cosmos because the right type of empathic, rational, honourable human being exists to make this possible.

Would you therefore say that it was practical experience, lasting for years, that provided your insights into and understanding of other religions, and of other Ways of Life?

Certainly, it was such practical experience, combined with a detailed personal and involved study lasting years. To actually live a particular Way of Life, for some years, is quite different from just studying it in a detached, academic, manner. To live a Way of Life is to associate with, to learn from, to come to know, others who follow, who believe in, who adhere to, that Way; and it is also to experience, to come to really know and discover, how its practices, its own presencing of what it regards and holds to be sacred, affects others and yourself and often society in general.

Thus, one learns the practical, everyday, reality of such a Way, and this, combined with a detailed, personal, and involved learning and study of it - from the learned ones of that Way - provides, in my view, a genuine insight into and a real knowledge of that Way. And an insight, a knowledge of, which - again in my considered opinion - is superior to a mere academic study of a particular Way.

So, having studied and immersed myself in many and diverse Ways over the past four decades, I believe I have been able to appreciate them and understand them, as well as discover whatever practical, ethical or philosophical flaws, if any, they may possess.

In addition, it has enabled me to in a quite literal way come to know and - most importantly - to change, and evolve myself: to know and to (hopefully) learn from my own mistakes. Thus, this immersion, this study - this practical four-decade long quest - has seen me, for instance, move beyond the nationalism, the racialism, of my past, as it has led me to understand, appreciate, to value, empathy and compassion, and to define personal honour as a living presencing of the numinous. It has also led me to construct, to

refine, over a period of some ten years, my own Way, my own philosophy, which I have called The Numinous Way, and it is this now completed philosophy of mine which provides the only satisfying answers I have found in answer to those fundamental questions I asked myself over forty years ago, now.

Which fundamental questions were what, exactly?

What is the purpose, if any, of our mortal life? Is there an existence, for us, after our mortal death? What type of society, and what type of individuals, are required - are best - in order for us to leave this planet which is and has been our home, and for us to thus explore and colonize the star-systems of our Galaxy? How can we change, evolve, ourselves in a positive, evolutionary way? What is the true, the human, meaning of freedom? Do we need laws, and if so who or what defines them? And, of course, what is our true nature, as human beings, possessed of the faculty of speech and the faculty of consciousness, of rational thought, and how did such faculties develop, or evolve? That is, were and are such faculties a gift from some Creator, or a natural consequence of our evolution?

Your answers, then, are provided in your philosophy of The Numinous Way?

Yes. In essence, the answers are empathy, compassion, and personal honour. Of ourselves, as individuals, being a nexion - a connexion to all life. Of how empathy, compassion, and honour enhance that connexion, and how causal abstractions, and the suffering they cause, limit, constrain or destroy, that connexion.

Quintessentially, it is a question of empathy: of us using and developing our human faculty of empathy, and thus of us being honourable, and compassionate.

Many people will be interested to know whether or not you really believed in the religions, the various ideologies and so on, which - as you say - you have acquired practical experience of in the last four decades.

Sometimes, but not always, for often it was curiosity; a desire to know, to learn, to experience. And this includes a curiosity about, a desire to know, my own limits, and how I might or could change, evolve, myself, and how I might experience the numinous in diverse ways, and so learn from such an experiencing: how I might understand the numen, the numinous, and what - if

anything - was beyond such things, or gave rise to, was the genesis of, such things.

To use a cliché: I sought wisdom, and the genesis of wisdom itself; sought to find the reality, the essence, behind what we have come to describe by the terms wisdom and numinous.

Would you say that your basic nature has changed, or been changed, by your experiences and learning? By your quest for wisdom? And if not, why not?

Certainly, I have changed, as a conscious, thinking, individual. Certainly my perception of myself - in relation to what I have called causal abstractions - has changed, and in relation to *others*, to what is termed *society*.

Certainly, I believe this change in me, of me, is now positive, evolutionary - that is, ethical, where by ethical I mean two related things. Firstly, striving to be honourable, and thus a striving to be empathic, to cease to cause suffering to other life balanced with an honourable, a noble, willingness to observe the limits of honour. Second, to cease to interfere, in the affairs of others, beyond the limits set by a personal, living, honour; which means, for instance, striving to live in the immediacy of the moment, and to forgo all causal abstractions, seeing such abstractions for the illusions, the un-numinous, unethical, things they are, and understanding all abstractions as containing, within themselves by their very nature, suffering or the causes of suffering.

What, then, are the limits or the conditions which a living honour sets? They are the conditions of honour being only and ever personal, direct - *of* the living moment of the life of an individual - and of requiring a mutual and personal respect.

Thus, honour cannot be abstracted out from the immediacy of the moment - from a personal, direct, encounter between individuals - and honour demands that an honourable individual be prepared and able to defend their own honour, in a practical way, if someone, or some many, treat or try to treat us in a dishonourable, ignoble, manner.

And it is in respect of honour, that I have not, fundamentally, changed - only come to understand honour better; to be able to define it; to make it the practical basis for the ethics, for the Way of Life, I have devised as result of my experiences and learning.

For, ever since a quite early age, I had a feeling for, an instinct for, honour; instinctively feeling that it was or perhaps should be the basis for a civilized, a cultured, an evolutionary, a human, way of life. Of course, there have been, in

the past forty years, a few occasions when I made the mistake, the error, of acting in what I inwardly considered to be a dishonourable way because I then believed, on those occasions, that some Cause or some *-ism* or some *-ology*, or some abstraction, or some ideal, or some goal, or loyalty to some abstract Deity or some oath, was more important, and that "sacrifices had to be made", and so on, etcetera.

Hence, as I mentioned previously, what I termed my dilemma of honour. Which I now believe I have resolved, by means of further developing The Numinous Way.

Would you now say that you have acquired wisdom?

I depends, naturally, on how one defines wisdom, and how honest one desires to be about one's self with others. If wisdom means acquiring an insightful understanding of one's self, of people, and of our human constructs, such a society and causal abstractions, bringing thus the ability to live, to behave, in an ethical way, then possibly I may have acquired something of the kind. There again, I have been wrong about myself, in the past.

But, the social - the current human - reality is that the answer should really be given by others, not by me; and given probably after the ending of my own mortal, causal, life as a result of those others having studied the results of my experiencing, manifest as these results are in The Numinous Way, in some of my poetry, in some of my personal letters to friends.

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(In Conversation with JRW)
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