

The Wisdom of Insecurity

A Message for a Time of Change

In 1951 the British philosopher Alan Watts published “The Wisdom of Insecurity,” commenting that his book was “written in the conviction that no theme could be more appropriate in a time when human life seems to be so peculiarly insecure and uncertain.” A decade later the pharmaceutical company Hoffman-La Roche characterized 1960’s America as “a whole new world of anxiety.” While Watts and Roche both recognized that the experience of anxiety in modern society is epidemic, the pharmaceutical company’s approach to working with it noticeably differed from the here-and-now philosophy that Watts had offered.

Roche’s answer to “the problem of anxiety” was to develop “minor tranquilizers” to slay our inner demons, medicating us to a happier life. It introduced the psychoactive drug Librium which was first put on the market to appeal to young college women who were “sensitive to and apprehensive about unstable national and world conditions.” Its successor, a stronger drug called Valium whose name was derived from Latin for “being strong, being well” soon became the largest selling drug in America. Roche “learned how to pitch the psychoactive drug to doctors of healthy patients who just needed a little something to unjangle their nerves,” according to a New York Times article called “Valium’s Contribution to Our New Normal.” It also appealed to the pressures of motherhood and became known in popular culture as “mother’s little helpers.”

If human life seemed insecure in the 1950’s and 1960’s, our times appear to offer even less solid ground. Addressing investors who are concerned about the economy, Neeti Bhalla of Goldman Sachs said that investors need to learn to live with uncertainty for quite some time. “The issues everyone is concerned about don’t have a finite end to them,” she said. By most accounts uncertainty seems to show up everywhere, in all corners of life. With all this uncertainty around what is wrong with a little pill, a little distraction, a little something to unjangle the nerves? Why not use our technological advances to avoid anxiety, neurosis and physical pain so that we can pursue a life of comfort and pleasure?

Touching on questions like these Alan Watts looked to the quality of being human. What sets us apart from animals is our sensitivity said Watts “which adds immeasurably to the richness of life.” Our sensitivity gives us the ability to lead fulfilling lives in which we can discover who we really are. At the same

time our sensitivity makes us particularly vulnerable. “There is a price to be paid for every increase in consciousness,” Watts observed. “We cannot be more sensitive to pleasure without being more sensitive to pain.” So to be fully human and fully alive and aware we must embrace our pleasure and our pain, our wisdom and anxiety, what we love and what we hate: the whole range of human experience.

Our attempts to fix our lives by taking a little something to unjangle the nerves or by finding ways to distract ourselves from pain renders us less capable of enjoyment. It muffles the wonder of being human. All natural processes – such as the rotation of the stars and the seasons – alternate between light and dark, ebb and flow, life and death. “For the poets have seen,” said Watts, “that life, change, movement and insecurity are so many names for the same thing.” It is the transitory nature of life that moves us.

When we manipulate our experience and expression of life by pursuing “the impossible and futile task of trying to get the water of life into neat and permanent packages” we feel separate and static, in contrast to the real, fluid world of nature. In fact our deepest “pleasure” is to be sensitive to all of our feelings, to be aware of everything that moves through our lives, to marvel in life’s changing nature, to be willing to be vulnerable and to extend ourselves beyond our fixed concepts about things.

There is, of course nothing wrong with pleasure. It is a beautiful experience. But the *pursuit* of pleasure in an effort to provide happiness at some time in the future is like a snake chasing its tail; you’ll never quite catch it. That’s because the pursuit takes us out of the present, which is the only place that pleasure can occur. It is possible to experience the richness of all that the present moment has to offer and to do that requires that we slow down.

One way to slow down and fully experience the moment is to tap into the inherent wisdom of the body. The author Eckhart Tolle speaks of an inner sense of aliveness that is very subtle. “Every cell is intelligently alive,” he says, “because the body is fulfilling thousands of functions simultaneously. It is not something that you can see. ‘You’ are not doing it, and yet it is there. The body is looking after itself. It has its own intelligence.”

The Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield invites us to hold the sensations of the body with compassionate awareness. As we practice this we become more and more able to extend this compassionate awareness to ourselves and all of life. Here are some excerpts from a beautiful meditation guided by Jack

Kornfield called "Body Meditation." To experience the full benefit of this meditation go to <http://youtu.be/COBSzdqDvAk>.

Before you read these words find a comfortable posture for yourself, stable and at ease.

Begin the meditation in this way: Let your eyes relax, your gaze becoming soft. Notice your breath - the movement of your chest and belly. Let yourself relax in the breathing as air fills your lungs. Notice the pause at the top of the breath. Allow the breath to leave your lungs, easily and without effort. Feel the momentary pause at the bottom of the breath. Notice how the cycle begins again as you take in the next breath. Let yourself rest in the breathing.

Scan your body now as you sit and let yourself feel the area that most deeply asks for healing. What place in your body asks for healing attention?

And as some place arises, feel deeply

what are the sensations?

the energies?

the quality of wounding that may be there.

And allow those sensations, or even that pain

to float in a sea of kind attention, as if your heart and mind was the ocean

and those sensations could be held with great kindness.

Name them softly: tingling, pain, whatever they are.

Allow them to open or change as they will.

It is as if through your kind attention you could place a healing hand anywhere within your body.

If you become aware of tension or pain in your body let the awareness be open and curious.

We have the name "pain" and usually we've been trained to run away, but what is the quality there?

Is it tightness or heat?

And if you hold it in a kind attention, what happens to it?

Let it open as it will.