

What Deadens Heart and Mind?’

What inhibits our experience of pain for our world, and the actions that it would summon? No external authority can stop us from feeling and sensing what’s happening to our world nor force us to close our eyes to what’s around us. So what stifles our responses, as individuals and as a society?

Fear of Pain

Our culture conditions us to view pain as dysfunctional. There are pills for headache, backache, neuralgia and premenstrual tension - but no pills for this pain for our world. Not even a stiff drink nor a Prozac prescription really helps. To permit ourselves to suffer anguish for the world is not only painful, but frightening; we imagine it threatens our ability to cope with daily life. We are afraid that if we were to let ourselves fully experience these feelings, we might fall apart, lose control or be mired in pain permanently.

Fear of Despair

A sense of some overarching meaning to our lives is as necessary as oxygen. We can face and endure tremendous hardships with heroic courage so long as we believe there is purpose to our existence, some value to our actions. But the present planetary crises, if we dare to look at what they forebode, present vistas of such unprecedented loss as to threaten with absurdity all that we have believed in. So, fearing that our lives might be drained of meaning, we look away.

When we are brave enough to study the available data, they turn out to be more alarming than most of us had assumed. Many peace and environmental advocates carry a heavy burden of knowledge. It is compounded by feelings of frustration, as they fight an uphill battle to arouse the public. Yet they view their own frustration and despair as counterproductive to their efforts. They take little or no time to honour their feelings, much less mourn. In their role as mobilizers of the public will, they may feel they can’t “let their hair down” and expose the extent of their own distress. The consequent and continual repression of feelings takes a toll on their energies that leaves them vulnerable to bitterness, depression, exhaustion and illness.

For people of religious faith, the prospect of losing hope is particularly challenging. “God won’t let this happen,” many think when faced with prospects of vast destruction and loss. Even to entertain such possibilities can seem to contradict our belief in a loving and powerful God, and in the goodness of creation itself. Are feelings of despair a sign of inadequate faith? Although every major religion calls us to open to the suffering we see around us, we tend to forget those summonses. Assuming, perhaps unconsciously, that our God is too fragile or too limited to encompass that pain, unsure whether God will meet us in the midst of such darkness, we hesitate to let ourselves experience it lest our faith be shattered or revealed as inadequate.

Other Spiritual Traps

There are those of us on a spiritual path who consider feelings of distress for the world as obstacles to be transcended. Grief and anger over current social and ecological conditions are then seen as attachments and judged to be less valuable than experiences of tranquility.

Moreover, some spiritual seekers view the personal and the political in a sequential fashion, believing that they must achieve enlightenment or salvation before they can serve the world. "I'll find peace within myself first, then I'll see what I can do." Supposing world and self to be essentially separate, they imagine they can heal one in isolation from the other.

There is also the fear that attention to the world's suffering will only make it worse. That notion resembles a philosophical perspective called subjective idealism, which sees consciousness as more 'real' than the phenomenal world. This can lead to a belief that contemplating the world's problems is negative thinking.

The understanding on which this book is based, however, is that we are inseparable from the world, and that the beauty and terror of our society co-arise with us. The crises facing us arise not from projections of our individual minds, so much as from our institutionalized ignorance, fear and greed.

Fear of Not Fitting In

A sanguine confidence in the future has been a hallmark of the American self-image and a source of national pride. The successful person - commercial and political campaigns tell us - has an optimistic can-do attitude and unquestioning faith in Progress. In such a culture, feelings of anguish and despair for our world appear as a failure of character and competence. Sadness and regret are taken as a sign of weakness, while impassivity is seen as "cool." No one wants to be called emotional or soft or seen as a prophet of doom or a conspiracy theorist.

Distrust of Our Own Intelligence

Many of us are reluctant to express our concerns for fear of getting embroiled in a debate requiring facts and figures beyond our command. The global economy encourages us to reply on so-called experts who tell us that there is no link between nuclear power plants and breast cancer, pesticide spraying and asthma, trade agreements and joblessness. It is easy to distrust our own judgement and intuitions, especially when others around us seem to agree with the way things are. This intellectual timidity, so useful to the power holders, can override our own perceptions and judgments.

Fear of Guilt

Few if any of us in the Industrial Growth Society are exempt from the suspicion that we are accomplices to far-reaching abuses. It is nearly impossible in today's global economy to feed, clothe and transport ourselves without unintended harm to the natural world and other people's well-being. Peter Marin wrote 40 years ago in an essay on moral pain:

Many of us suffer a vague, inchoate sense of betrayal, of having somehow taken the wrong turning, of having somehow said yes or no at the wrong time and to the wrong things, of having somehow taken upon ourselves a general kind of guilt, having two coats while others have none, or just having too much while others have too little - yet proceeding, nonetheless, with our lives as they are.

We also carry a sense of accountability for the massive acts of violence perpetrated in our name. Americans have a huge burden to bear in this respect: the decimation of our native peoples; the enslavement of Africans and the oppression of their descendants; the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the Vietnam War; the military and economic devastation of Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond; suppression of liberation movements around the world; drone warfare and spiraling arms exports; CIA-abetted drug traffic; torture and detention without trial; mass surveillance of governments and citizens. The painful list goes on. We prefer to sweep it under the rug because we hate feeling guilty because it undermines our self-respect. We have neither patience nor practices for dealing with collective guilt, but we can learn. South Africa, Germany and Guatemala among other nations have shown it is possible to acknowledge moral shame with strength and dignity - and that doing so is healing. Meanwhile, until we all learn what to do with our feelings of guilt, we are likely to lock them away - and in so doing, lock up our pain for the world.

Fear of Distressing Loved Ones

Pain for the world is repressed not only out of embarrassment and guilt, but out of caring as well. We are reluctant to burden our loved ones; we would shield them from the distress we carry. For parents and grandparents this psychological dilemma is especially difficult and delicate. We don't want our children to be troubled or fearful as they face the already challenging tasks of learning and growing. Our deep desire to protect them from harm can make us try to protect them from knowing what's happening to their world. Our silence, however, may give our children the impression that we don't know what's happening - or worse, that we don't care.

View of Self as Separate

It is hard to believe we feel pain for the world if we assume we're separate from it. The individualistic bias of Western culture supports that assumption. Feelings of fear, anger or

despair about the world tend to be interpreted in terms of personal pathology. Our distress over the state of the world is seen as stemming from some neurosis, rooted perhaps in early trauma or unresolved issues with a parental figure that we're projecting on society at large. Thus we are tempted to discredit feelings that arise from solidarity with our fellow-beings. Conditioned to take seriously only those feelings that pertain to our individual needs and wants, we find it hard to believe that we can suffer on behalf of society itself, or on behalf other life-forms, and that such suffering is real and valid and healthy.

Hijacked Attention

Almost everywhere we go, electronic devices exert an ongoing claim on our attention. Our vulnerability to interruption makes it difficult to reflect deeply or sustain meaningful conversation. Electronic communications - smart phones and texting, email, Facebook and Twitter - all have effects on the human mind that we have barely begun to understand. As David Orr has reflected:

If useful in real emergencies, the overall result is to homogenize the important with the trivial, making everything an emergency and an already frenetic civilization even more frenetic. As a result, we are drowning in unassimilated information, most of which fits no meaningful picture of the world. In our public affairs and in our private lives we are, I think, increasingly muddle-headed because we have mistaken volume and speed of information for substance and clarity.

The distraction of the mind dulls our response to the fragments of news we receive, which begin to constitute a virtual reality with little more emotional impact than a video game. We drown in bits of information that engulf our self-awareness and dilute our connection to the real world around us. Not only is our attention hijacked, but our imagination as well, diminishing our capacity to envision what we might yet create.

Fear of Powerlessness

"I don't think about that because there is nothing I can do about it." We have all heard this response to a discussion of a social or ecological problem. Logically, it is a non sequitur, confusing what can be thought and felt with what can be done. And it is a tragic one, for when forces are seen as so vast that they cannot be consciously contemplated or seriously discussed, we are doubly victimized - impeded in thought as well as action.

Resistance to painful information on the grounds that we cannot do anything about it springs less from powerlessness (as measured by our capacity to effect change) than from the fear of *feeling* powerless.

The predominant model of self in Western culture - "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul" - discourages us from confronting issues for which we have no immediate solutions. We feel that we ought to be in charge of our existence and to have all the answers. And so we

tend to shrink the sphere of our attention to those areas that we believe we can directly control. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: the smaller our sphere of attention, the smaller our sphere of influence.

Fear of Knowing - and Speaking

The plight of a child in an alcoholic family is more familiar to us now than in generations past. We know that such a child is often afraid to acknowledge even to herself the abuse and neglect suffered at the hands of an alcoholic parent - much less disclose it to anyone else. This happens for a number of reasons, such as:

- 1) Any complaint or mention of the problem is likely to incur the wrath of the parent, leading to more physical and verbal abuse.
- 2) Disclosure to outside authorities could result in the child's losing the only family and home she knows.
- 3) A child may be told she's crazy and imagining things, inducing her to doubt her own perceptions, or at least to keep very quiet about them.

A similar drama plays out on the national political stage. For example, there is a mountain of evidence regarding the 9-11 attacks that was excluded from the 9-11 Commission's report. It remains unaddressed by the US government, mainstream media and most of US civic institutions. Why do we avoid raising the questions and discussing the evidence publically, even with our own families and friends? Perhaps we are under similar pressures as the child in the alcoholic family:

- 1) We may fear retribution from the Powers That Be: being fired, blackballed, imprisoned or disappeared.
- 2) Like the child who cling to an abusive parent, we may cling to an image of our leaders as essentially well meaning, even if incompetent. "Our government would never knowingly allow that to happen! How can you suggest such a thing?"
- 3) Perhaps more prevalent, especially for public figures, is the fear of risking reputation and public confidence by being seen as crazy as the oft-ridiculed conspiracy theorist.

The trouble is that the more we in the US avoid discussing 9-11 publically, the more taboo the subject becomes, And the more we live under a collective cloud of ignorance and denial on this matter, the more docile and obedient we become, abdicating our civic responsibility to take remedial measures.

Mass Media

The corporate global economy, with the increasing pressures it exerts on individuals, families and communities and its spreading control of information channels makes it difficult for people to hear the world's cries of distress.

Most Americans get their news from corporate-controlled media. At the same time, right-wing interest and ideologues are buying up the major newspapers, radio and television stations across the country which people have looked to over the years for balanced reporting. Now too often, they find misinformation, outright deception and the fomenting of false fears in once-trusted media. Such manipulation of the news keeps people ignorant and confused about what's really going on.

Moreover, corporate-controlled media serve largely as entertainment, soporific, and as a goad to consume. As the economy has globalized and corporations have sunk their teeth into every society they can reach across the world, the monoculture they purvey spins dreams of an unobtainable and irresponsible life style. The message of this monoculture is dramatized by Australian activities Benny Sable. At protests against clearcutting, uranium mining and other corporate depredations, he stands motionless, often high atop a pile of casks marked radioactive, in a black wetsuit painting with a skeleton and these words:

CONSUME
OBEY
BE SILENT
DIE

Job and Time Pressures

The worldwide financial crisis forces people to scramble for jobs and makes them insecure in those jobs they manage to hang on to. Moonlighting, workers rush from one job to another to piece together a living wage. Most young families in North America, in order to pay the bills, need both parents to hold a job - or try to. The pace accelerates, taking its toll on every spare moment, every relationship. As employment benefits are cut, labour unions destroyed and social health and welfare programs decimated, the world narrows down to one's own and one's family's survival. There's little time or energy to learn about the fate of the world- or to let it sink in. If a free hour is left at the end of the day, it's easy just to zone out in front of the tube.

Social Violence

These economic hardships tear the fabric of our society and breed violence. Jobless youth, inflamed by the brutality portrayed by the media, act out their hopelessness and sense of betrayal. We walk fearfully on our own city streets, put armed police in our schools, barricade ourselves behind locked doors or take refuge in gated enclaves. Demagogues direct our frustrations against other groups, blaming those most victimized. For the failures of corporate capitalism, we scapegoat each other.

Whether or not the violence of our society injures one physically, it colours our common life. It finds expression in everyday thoughts and acts, in verbal abuse and road rage as well as police

brutality at home and military brutality abroad. We try to protect our heart with a defensive armor that closes it to the pain of our world.

The Cost of Blocking Our Pain for the World

We may try to protect ourselves from feeling pain for the world, but that very effort costs us a great deal. We pay a high price in diminished awareness, understanding and authenticity.

Impeded Cognitive Functioning

Repression takes a mammoth toll on our energy and dulls our perceptions of the world around us. It is not a local anesthetic. If we won't feel pain, we won't feel much else either - loves and losses are less intense, the sky is less vivid, pleasures muted. As a doctor working with Vietnam veterans observed, "The mind pays for its deadening to the state of our world by giving up its capacity for joy and flexibility."

Repression of our anguish for the world affects our thinking as well. It weakens our cognitive functioning. We cut ourselves off from information that contradicts our preferred assessment of the situation and that might arouse stressful feelings. Consequently, there's less of our natural intelligence available to us.

Impeded Access to the Unconscious

To filter out the truth of one's situation is a form of self-deception. The subliminal censorship impedes access to the vast realm of the unconscious, that wellspring of intuition, creativity and foodstuff for genius, the part of us that knows we're embedded in life.

What we ban from consciousness does not disappear. On an individual level, we store repressed material in our bodies where it may manifest as illness. And on the collective level, as Carl Jung pointed out, the distress we would banish gets acted out on the stage of history.

Impeded Instinct for Self-Preservation

The instinct for self-preservation, recognized as the most powerful drive in the biological realm, is essential to the preservation of our species and the ongoingness of life. In the ancient Hindu chakra system, this drive is identified with the base chakra or muladhara. It represents and feeds our instinctual nature, source of our claim on life itself.

To be afraid to look at and respond to that which threatens all life constitutes a blocking of the muladhara, cutting off primal intelligence and energies essential to survival. This chakra not only represents a last line of defence in the protection of life, but it also feeds the erotic currents of our days and years. Opening the base chakra - and thereby our full will to live - means opening ourselves to the repressed tears and rage of our pain for the world.

Impeded Eros

To be cut off from this root chakra robs us of our birthright to deep ecstatic connections within the web of life. Without Eros, our lives become more desiccated and robotic, even as we dream up robots to serve us. This loss of Eros has led to a flourishing of pornography in which we pathetically try and revitalize our sexual natures in contrived and trivializing ways. The frustration of so basic an urge can lead to violence as well.

When the erotic drive is weak, we pay less respect to the aesthetic dimension of life. No longer seeing the arts as essential, we use them for embellishment and display of wealth, and we cut support and funding for art, music and drama in our schools and communities.

At the same time, we see a desperate pursuit of pleasure and short-term gratification in our culture today. There seem to be a new hedonism in the consumption of goods, entertainment, sex, alcohol. This hedonism derives from more than sheer appetite. Its frantic quality does not reflect a healthy lust for life so much as the contrary: the absence of- and yearning for - a truly erotic connection to life.

Impeded Empathy

Eros nourishes our rootedness in the web of life, fostering empathy, that vital connection to those with whom we share this world. Without empathy, our natural capacity to sense and identify with the joy and suffering of others is crippled. Instead, we tend to project our repressed fears and anger onto other people. Carl Jung called this the projection of the Shadow. The 9-11 event made us afraid, and people in the US were given an enemy as an object for our fear: Muslim people of the world. This allowed us to feel justified in our military actions against Muslim countries and fosters fear of those in our midst. It is hard to feel empathy for those we fear and hate, precisely when empathy is most needed. Zhiwa Woodbury has captured the dismal situation this leads to:

Unfortunately, it seems all too predictable that a freedom-loving, gun-toting, substance-abusing, individualist country like America will approach the end of life as we know it with a fair amount of anti-social pathology, transposing the breakdown of our life support system into a breakdown in the social order, with many responding to the existential threat with paranoia and hostility, deciding it's "every man for himself" or, alternatively, seeking security in like-minded militias and religious cults.

Impeded Imagination

Free play of the imagination requires trust in life and courage to walk where there is no path. It takes us beyond our perceptions of what is to what might be, opening us to new ways of seeing and new ways of being. The powers of mind are then liberated from the dead hand of habit.

Imagination suggests alternatives to the dominant narratives of our time and can keep us from surrendering to conformity and mob mentality.

This crucial source of all creativity is blocked when we resist images, ideas or feelings that might trigger moral pain.

Impeded Feedback

All open systems, be they organic or social, self-regulate by virtue of feedback - that is, by monitoring the results of their moment-by-moment behaviour. Our sensory, cognitive and emotional responses can bring us information to guide our actions. If we consider that we are an integral part of our world, then we can see that closing our hearts and minds to its suffering blocks feedback to essential life.

Silencing our deepest responses to the condition of our world not only fosters a sense of futility, but also mires us in it. Each act of denial, conscious or unconscious, is an abdication of our power to respond. It relegates us to the role of victim, before we even see what we can and want to do.

Coming Back to Life

Our pain for the world, including the fear, anger and sorrow we feel on behalf of life on EArth is not only pervasive. It is natural and healthy. It is dysfunctional only to the extent that it is misunderstood and repressed. We have seen in this chapter how that repression happens in today's culture and what it costs us.

We don't break free from denial and repression by gritting our teeth and trying to be nobler, braver citizens. We don't retrieve our passion for life, our wild, innate creative intelligence by scolding ourselves and soldiering on with a stiff upper lip. The model of heroic behaviour belongs to the worldview that gave us the Industrial Growth Society.

The most remarkable features of this historical moment on Earth is not that we are on the way to destroying our world - we've actually been the way quite a while. It is that we are beginning to wake up, as from a millennia-long sleep, to a whole new relationship to our world, to ourselves and each other. We described it in Chapter 1 as a shift in consciousness, the third dimension of that revolution. It is so central to the arising of the Life-Sustaining Society that it is like the hub of a turning wheel.

The worldview emerging now lets us behold anew and experience afresh the web of life in which we exist. It opens us to the vast intelligence of life's self-organizing powers, which have brought us forth from interstellar gases and primordial seas. It brings us to a larger identity in which to cradle and transcend our ego-identified fears. It lets us honour our pain for the world as

a gateway into deep participation in the world's self-healing. The group work of the last four decades that this book describes is based on this worldview.

More basic to the Great Turning than any ideas we hold is the act of courage and love we make together when we dare to see our world as it is.

- Transcribed from "Coming Back to Life" by Joanna Macy and Molly Brown