

# **The courage to be who you truly are**

## ***The importance of individuality, subjectivity and vulnerability in our lives***

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The modern world in which we are living, human society, is changing very fast today. At this stage it can have escaped no one that we are confronted with various crises that are regularly discussed in the media – like an ecological crisis, a gender crisis, a racial crisis, a refugee crisis, an identity crisis, a mental health crisis, an economic crisis, and also a war crisis. Although these crises are usually discussed separately, they are in fact intertwined, manifestations of an all-encompassing ‘polycrisis’ of such an unprecedented, planetary scale that it can make us feel quite powerless. It’s no wonder that many people do not want to think about it any longer and choose to shut their minds from it. Easy populist explanations and conspiracy theories help to keep their attention distracted and leave some space for engaging in pleasant activities. Even the wars that are threatening and happening in many places on our planet at this very moment, can be seen as ways – however unconscious they might be – to keep distracting our attention. As long as we can believe there is an enemy, existing somewhere outside of ourselves across some border, that badly needs to be slain, we don’t have to face the uncomfortable situation that humanity on the whole has brought itself into.

But there comes a point in anybody’s life when distractions will not work anymore, and that we have to face what is happening in the world all around us and in our own minds. The happenings in our inner and outer world are of course inextricably connected with each other. The ideas we have about ourselves are reflected in the way we treat our fellow human beings, other living beings and the surrounding natural world. Rather than

immediately trying to trigger changes in the world around is, a much better and more realistic option is to begin with ourselves. As Gandhi is supposed to have said, be the change you want to see in the world. Therefore, to understand what is going on in the world around us, it is good to first understand who we truly are – and, thereafter, also to have the courage to openly show our authentic self to others as much as possible.

The polycrisis has been generated to a large extent by moving away from our authentic self and clinging to an alienated sense of self, and acting collectively from the position of an alienated sense of self. And that is, of course, nothing but the narrowed sense of self of our ego-consciousness. This alienation process has manifested itself increasingly and collectively across the millennia, but it has also manifested itself in our own personal lives, from the moment we were born. In this article I focus on the impact of the alienation in our personal lives, on how many of us have gradually lost touch with the qualities of our authentic self.

I think *individuality*, *subjectivity* and *vulnerability* are the most important qualities that characterize our authentic self. We might have forgotten that we are all born as individual, subjective and vulnerable beings. In our authentic self we feel inextricably connected to and fully embedded in the cyclical natural world around us. No one is excepted from having this kind of authentic sense of self, however deep it might have become buried and hidden somewhere deep within us: criminals and dictators, for instance, were also born as vulnerable beings, and scientists also were born as subjective beings.

These qualities show that at heart we are all good people – that we are ‘born to be good’, and even ‘to bring the good in others to completion’, as the American psychologist Dacher Keltner has expressed it so aptly.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, we can never lose these qualities completely – and this is a hopeful sign –, but in the modern Western world they have been misunderstood and driven to the background. In this article I want to rehabilitate their reputation, and to show that making once again aware that these qualities are part of our authentic sense of self, will help us to create – in the words of Charles Eisenstein – ‘the more beautiful world that our hearts know is possible’.<sup>2</sup>

### **‘Excessive individualism’ and egocentrism**

It has been suggested that one of the major causes of the polycrisis that we are facing today is our ‘excessive individualism’. In this state we are driven to put the fulfillment of our own desires always first – above the relationships we have with other people, other living beings and the larger natural world. In this view on ‘individualism’, as an individual we do not only put our own desires first, we also cannot patiently wait on the fulfillment of our desires, and we make this a short term priority. We want fulfillment as soon as possible: impatience is very much part of this view on ‘individualism’. It is hardly surprising that these desires have easily come into conflict with those of other people, who also have made their fulfillment a short term priority. And of course this mentality has not just affected relationships between individual people, but has also affected groups of people, entire societies and even our relationship with the natural world.

I think, however, that the term ‘individualism’ gives a wrong impression of what individuality, and being a true individual, actually is about. That’s why I have put it in brackets here. By using the word ‘individualism’ we have erroneously associated the individual with the egocentric side of our being, the side of ourselves that exists at the surface, located primarily in the left hemisphere of our brain. What has led to today’s crises is a widespread emphasis on, appreciation of, and identification with the egocentric side of our being – as if this tiny fragment and relatively recently developed part of ourselves fully represents who we are. This doesn’t mean, however, that it should be our goal to get rid of our ego, as we cannot do without it. But since we have started to *identify* ourselves more and more exclusively with our ego-consciousness, we have, perhaps unknowingly, created the trap of the various interrelated crises that we are confronted with today.

Once our identification with the ego is firmly rooted, we stubbornly keep clinging to it ever more tightly and thereby walk a path on which looms the danger of ‘inflating’ the ego. The term *ego inflation* was first used by Jungian psychologists, and refers to a process in which a person starts to believe he or she possesses ‘superhuman’ powers – mythic powers that are usually reserved for Gods and Goddesses. Therefore, in this respect the American mythologist Joseph Campbell spoke about a *mythic inflation*.<sup>3</sup>

According to the Jungian researchers Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, it indicates that ‘individuals take upon themselves the powers and attributes that, they believe, belong to a deity, even to the extent of believing the deity is incarnated in their own persons or that they are enacting the will of the deity.’<sup>4</sup> It is by this ego/mythic inflation, that rulers – throughout the entire period that we traditionally still associate with the history of the Western world – have been driven to believe that they actually possessed superhuman, godly powers.

This has influenced the entire course of Western world and resulted in societies that were built on the principles of hierarchy, private ownership, domination and exploitation – and the continuous excessive use of outer power (or *power over*), by the (male) rulers over the other people to keep their societies together. This began with the first city states in Sumer, which grew later to larger states and later still into empires, and since the 19<sup>th</sup> century it manifested itself again in the form of the nation states. This kind of outer power has been permitted and protected by written laws since the first city states, and has become the foundation of our patriarchal culture that has managed to survive up to today. About this historical development I have written extensively elsewhere – in several articles<sup>5</sup> and in my Dutch book *Het helende verhaal* (‘The healing story’), that was published in 2023 in the Netherlands.<sup>6</sup> This development was marked at the beginning, about 6000 years ago, by what I have called *the Patriarchal Shift* – a paradigm shift that has affected the entire development of the Western world up to today, and has eventually brought us to the current crisis situation.

History has shown us again and again, that, no matter how much hierarchical power rulers was exerted over people and over the rest of the living world, this could never prevent the societies from collapsing at some point. Seen from a global perspective, it is also a fact that every collapse has always had a huge impact on the interpersonal relationships and caused an awful lot of suffering and also made many casualties. But in earlier societies, like the Greek and Roman empires, the impact of these collapses still managed to stay relatively small-scale. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, with the collapse of the Nazi empire after the Second World War, we have seen that these kinds of collapses have now become global affairs that involve everyone on the planet. Since that time, the globalization process has continued to spread even further across the planet. Because we got used

to treating Mother Earth as dead matter that we could exploit and poison without any limit, this has brought us into an ecological crisis on a planetary scale. And through the ongoing development of technology, we have also managed to produce ever more destructive weapons.

Taken everything together, this means that we cannot allow another collapse to happen anymore, as it will probably wipe humanity from the face of the earth. This is a reality that more and more people have become aware of, but that some people in charge of politics and business today do not seem to have fully grasped yet. If we want to prevent such a collapse from happening again – and want to help instead with triggering a peaceful transformation toward a more sustainable form of human society on a planetary level – we must first understand what has led us to situation today. I already pointed out that I have written quite extensively about the collective historical development elsewhere, so I will focus here on the development in our personal lives.

### **Balanced duality and individuality**

With regard to our personal development, it is very important to first acknowledge that – contrary to popular belief – our individuality has not contributed at all to the manifestation of today's polycrisis. There are even enough indications, that our individual development, and – related to it – our growth to maturity, is actually an important part of the solution! It is a mistake to think that individual development will stand in the way of feeling connected to and engaging socially with the surrounding world. No, developing oneself individually should be made a priority for everyone – in all countries across the planet – if we want to deal structurally with the various crises and simultaneously contribute to the building of a better, more sustainable world. Without any exception, individual development will help everyone to create a more open mind, or to recover the open mind they were born with and have lost along the way. Having an open mind will also be beneficial for us to develop socially and to contribute to the creation of flourishing communities, and also to help changing our relationship with the wider natural world for the better.

What is true individuality about? I already pointed out that the word 'individualism' creates the wrong idea about the nature of individuality. The physicist David Bohm has once pointed out that an 'individual' is someone

who is ‘undivided’ – in other words, someone who is a whole person.<sup>7</sup> This means that, in his view, there are yet very few individuals living on this planet, because most people still experience a permanent division in their lives – a mind that is divided and that expresses itself in dualistic thinking. Bohm has pointed out that ‘dividual’ is a better term for someone who is divided. I think that we – like every other living being – are born as whole beings, as individuals, and that individual development can only manifest itself in us when we manage to stay in touch with our individuality.

Interestingly, the second part of the term – *duality* – does indeed point to the fact that there are two sides to who we actually are. With regard to these two sides of our being, the Dutch anthropologist Jan van Baal has argued that on the one hand we are born from and remain deeply connected to the universe, and on the other hand we are subjects who put themselves in opposition to the world.<sup>8</sup> In other words, we are both interconnected and separated beings. In psychological terms Van Baal’s ‘subject’ is of course the ego. It should be clear that the reality of our dual nature need not automatically lead to a division, to an internal tension between these two sides, or to a projection outwardly by a dualistic worldview. We begin our life as true individuals, by being born in a balanced state – a state in which these two sides of ourselves are not in conflict with each other and in which our subject/ego-side is a servant to our deeper and more powerful interconnected self. In other words, the default state of our individual mind, at the very beginning, is a state of *balanced duality*.

This balanced state is beautifully depicted by the ancient Taoist Yin/Yang symbol. It shows that in nature there is a balance between dark and light, between night and day, between winter and summer, between death and life, between the feminine and the masculine – all expressions of the balance between Yin and Yang. In the natural world everything is always moving in cycles, from one pole to another, but these poles are not in opposition to each other but complementary, and together they always remain in a state of balance. It is important to realize, however, that in the human world we have to put more conscious effort in maintaining this balance. In any case, it is mutual process: we need to constantly renew the state of balanced duality in ourselves to be able to keep observing the world with an open mind, and we need to keep reopening our mind to maintain the inner state of balanced duality. To be able to keep growing psychologically

and spiritually, we need to have both an open mind and an inner state of balanced duality, and the interplay between them. The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung called this inner growth process toward maturity ‘individuation’, which shows that he was very aware of the fact that our individuality plays an important role in our growth process.

It is good to add to this that as individuals, as whole persons, we experience ourselves and the world around us in a holarchical way. The term *holarchy* was coined by Arthur Koestler in the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> A holarchy is a natural ordering system in which everything consists on different levels of *holons*. These holons are characterized by the fact that each one is always both a whole in itself and part of a larger whole. That larger whole always includes many smaller holons, like, for instance, an organ always consists of many cells. In this way, life is always structured in a web-like way, and in this web the natural boundaries between the holons are permeable, open for mutual communication and exchange.

So, as individuals, we are not selfish by giving attention to ourselves, to our own health and our growth process in various ways, because we are simultaneously engaged socially with other people and the society we live in, and particularly have a strong sense of being embedded in the surrounding natural world. In our individual experience, the inner and the outer world belong together, are one. In our individual experience, there is no division and opposition between of our inner world and the outer world – and they are complementary and intertwined with each other. As individuals we even feel that we intimately belong to the natural world around us, to the surrounding landscape, by which this outer world becomes part of our inner world, and we feel closely connected to it, at home in it. As an individual, on the one hand we feel very humble and small in a vast universe, but on the other hand our awareness and our deep sense of connection extend far into that universe.

### **Unbalanced dualism and egocentrism**

Of course, we cannot expect to be in a state of perfect balance all the time. The development of the ego is an overwhelming experience that tends to disturb our balanced state every now and then. And during our life we have to remain aware of forces in and around us that will keep challenging this balanced state, that will temporarily close off our open mind and engages us

in a fight-or-flight response due to confrontation with (real or imagined) dangers.

But we can also easily lose our state of balanced duality for a longer period during our life. When we start connecting our *identity* to the ego on a more permanent basis, we lose touch with our state of balanced duality and we fall in the trap of *unbalanced dualism*. In that mental state our undivided experience of individuality is transformed into an experience of division, a sense of separation that characterizes the mental state of *egocentrism*. As pointed out earlier, in this case it is better to use the term ‘egocentrism’ than to talk about ‘individualism’.

When people identify have started to identify with their ego, they often act as if the other part of their mind – the deeper interconnected side of their being – does not even exist. But of course, we cannot simply wish it away. We have a dual nature that we can never escape. Our other, interconnected side keeps attracting our attention all the time, and if we have suppressed it, this happens in the form of enemies that we believe are threatening us and that we urge to fight against. They are mere projections, as the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung has pointed out, of the inner archetype of the Shadow – but this archetype is very powerful. These projections are, curiously enough, not just forces of *rejection*, but also of *attraction*. These two forces exist simultaneously and cannot be separated from each other. That is why an egocentric person, full of hatred and perhaps also mythically inflated, always keeps searching for his or her enemies, to be able to fight against them.

With respect to the term ‘egocentrism’, it is good to be aware of the fact that all the terms that end with ‘ism’ have something in common. All these terms refer to a collective mental state in which people feel united with each other in a group. That group can be related to a certain locality, like ‘nationalism’, or unrelated to locality, like ‘fascism’. What these ‘isms’ share is, that people who associate themselves with a particular ‘ism’, have – consciously or unconsciously – tied their identity to it. Egocentrism fits into this frame as well: in this case the people rather not identify with this label, but the identification exists anyway on an unconscious level. It is from within an egocentric identification that we then put the fulfillment of our own desires first, above anything else, yet then we do this from the

position of a strong identification with a group or various groups of people that supposedly share the same or similar ideas with each other.

The group that a certain 'ism' is associated with need not conflict with another 'ism'; sometimes these 'isms' are closely linked to each other. Nationalism, for instance, refers to a strong identification with people who happen to live between a certain national border and who believe they share the same outlook on life and the same culture – which, in their view, differs essentially from the outlook and culture of the people who live across the national border. Putting your own people on a national level first, above all the foreigners, is of course quite similar to putting your own personal desires first, above the relationships with other people – and therefore nationalism and egocentrism are closely linked to each other. And both nationalism and egocentrism are driven by dualism, by dualistic thinking.

In the section about balanced duality and individuality I said that in that state of mind we experience the world around us in a holarchical way; in a weblike way, with the boundaries between everything always open for mutual communication and exchange. Individual people generally have an egalitarian worldview and act according to the principle of Diversity and Inclusion on a daily basis. The mindset connected to unbalanced dualism and egocentrism, however, is focused on hierarchical relationships. Egocentric people often think in terms of superiority and inferiority, and act according to the principle of Uniformity and Exclusion.

It is good to be aware of the fact that the state of dualism is unbalanced. Then there are two forces opposed to one another in an absolute and exclusive way. The ongoing struggle with one another will cost a lot of energy. When we are trapped in this dualistic mindset, all our energy is wasted on attacking others and defending ourselves, and cannot be used for our individual growth process. In this respect, the American biologist and writer Bruce Lipton has pointed out that our growth process is determined from the cellular level. According to him, research has shown that the membrane of the cell appears to function as its brain that can decide which influences from the environment are permitted to enter the cell and how the potential of the genes can develop itself. This membrane can open itself or close itself off, and openness is here the default position. Lipton has argued that this functioning of the membrane on the cellular level also works on the level of our organism as a whole, in our body and our mind. In his vision, as

an organism we are a community of cells, ‘a cooperative community of approximately 50 trillion single-celled citizens’.<sup>10</sup> This means that when we as individual people we are open-minded, we can and also will grow – not only biologically, but also psychologically and spiritually. In other words, we are not only born to be good, as Dacher Keltner has indicated. We are also born to grow, and to keep growing during our entire life.

This also means that our dualistic mindset blocks our potential to grow psychologically and spiritually. The inner and outer struggles we get involved in have the tendency to intensify. In the end, this becomes unbearable, and can even make us sick. Therefore, we badly need to return to the state of balance to trigger our growth potential again, to rediscover the forgotten individual in ourselves. When we have seriously lost this balance, the reopening of our mind can be experienced as an awakening experience, as an awakening from the sleep of our ego, in the sense the English psychologist Steve Taylor has talked about it in several of his books. Through awakening experiences we get into to touch again with our state of balanced duality, with the individual in ourselves.<sup>11</sup>

### **Inner power and power over**

Individuality is closely associated with the experience of power we feel within ourselves, with *inner power*. When individuality changes to egocentrism we lose touch with this inner power, and – without being aware of it – we substitute it for outer power, power that we project from an imagined position of separation and superiority on other people, other beings and the whole of the natural world. Feminists have called this *power over*. Interestingly, Scilla Elworthy – a renowned ‘peace builder’ who was nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize and won several awards – has associated gender differences to the distinction between the two kinds of power. She identified inner power as *feminine power* that is focused on being open and cooperative. In her view, the other form of power is a masculine power over, which she calls *domination power* and is focused on forcing others to do what you want them to do. According to her, power over is a poor substitute for the original form of inner power and in our time we badly need to rediscover and reevaluate the importance of inner power.<sup>12</sup>

The shift from outer domination power to inner power is also a shift of the center of identity experience in our body: namely, from our head – and

in particular from the ego in our left hemisphere – to our heart, or a little lower, to the hara center, where the womb is located in women. From the position of inner power, we put our energy in enhancing the inner power of all the other living beings around us, including of course other human beings. I already referred to the Dacher Keltner's insight that we are not only 'born to be good' but also want to 'bring the good in others to completion'. That is happening when we live from our inner power. Then we experience ourselves on an equal level with other people, whatever their cultural background or education, wherever they happen to live, and treat other living beings with all the respect that we can give them. From the position of inner power we have a genuine interest in people who are different from us, find them interesting for that reason, and therefore want to get to know them better. Our interest is not limited to the human world. We also have a genuine interest in the surrounding natural world – in the landscape with all the visible plant and animal species living in it –, but also in getting to know and becoming familiar with the invisible power that animates nature.

This interest disappears immediately when we have started to identify ourselves with our imagined position of superiority, with power over, and from this position exert power over other human beings and over the rest of nature. Perhaps we can still pretend to be interested in the lives of the people we exert power over and want to keep in control – as rulers often do –, but it should be obvious that we cannot be truly interested in people that we consider inferior and relatively insignificant.

I hardly need to add here, I think, that inner power is related to a holarchical outlook on life, and that power over is related to a hierarchical outlook on life.

### **Consciousness and brain cells**

It is good to point out here that the identification of ourselves with the ego is closely related to the idea of the brain producing our consciousness – a view that is still mainstream in the world of materialist science. Only from the position of our dominating ego-consciousness, the idea could be born that our brain cells are responsible for producing our consciousness. In this view, in which we believe that due to evolutionary development we are endowed with the highest form of consciousness, we have not hesitated to

put ourselves on the top of the evolutionary ladder. From within this ego perspective, animals have a less developed form of consciousness, and plants have no consciousness at all, as they have no brain like we have. It is good to recall that Descartes, who has had a lot of influence on the outlook of materialist science, argued a few centuries ago that also animals had no soul and consciousness, and were mere machines.

Although generally we do not subscribe anymore to the idea of considering animals to be mere machines and believe that animals do have a form of consciousness, albeit a more simple form, materialist science remains the mainstream form of science. And from within this specific scientific viewpoint, the notion that plants and the natural world at large might possess consciousness is still a heretical idea. In hindsight, it should not have surprised us that this deep conviction – about the existence of lesser forms of consciousness in other living beings, the pure absence of it in plants, and the related notion of a planet consisting of dead matter – eventually had to lead to a large scale, limitless exploitation of the entire surrounding natural world.

### **The conscious individual**

Fortunately, there is a lot of development going on in the world of science: more and more scientists are open to a post-materialist science, in which consciousness is considered primary, instead of matter.<sup>13</sup> The individual in us knows that the idea of brain cells producing our consciousness is outdated. This idea ignores the fact that more and more people have experienced intensified forms of conscious in which the brain played no role at all, like during near-death experiences and out-of-body experiences. All that materialist scientist can only offer in these instances, are attempts to explain them away as hallucinations, to devalue them as anecdotal, to ridicule them, or to ignore them completely – so they do they don't need to take them seriously.

According to the individual, consciousness is primary. The brain is still considered important, but functions as a receiver and mediator of consciousness, or consciousness might even contribute to the creation of the brain. So the roles of consciousness and the brain are reversed. If you are curious about the reality that people experience during a near-death experience, read the books by Eben Alexander, Anita Moorjani or Nancy

Rynes, and decide for yourself.<sup>14</sup> Or the watch and listen on YouTube to some of the extended and often moving interviews by Anthony Chene of people who have had a near-death experience.<sup>15</sup> Stories about these kinds of experiences were sometimes withheld for decades, because of fear for ridicule, but due to a changing cultural climate people are less afraid of making them public these days. All these stories are serious and genuine, and show without any doubt that consciousness is primary.

In the worldview of the individual there is also room for the idea that all living beings, and even the entire natural world, possess a certain form of consciousness. In fact, individual development was necessary to open the human mind for that possibility: first, our own consciousness needed to be experienced in an expanded way, before the notion of consciousness being primary to the brain, and mind to matter, could be taken seriously. It turned out that it was a rediscovery, as this had been part of the worldview of many spiritual traditions of our distant ancestors and still living indigenous peoples.

### **Revaluating our subjectivity**

Being an individual also means cherishing (once again) the value of your subjective experiences. But growing up in a society still dominated by the secular outlook of materialist science, from an early age we learn to devalue our subjective experiences.

I'm not telling anything new when I say that objectivity is central to the way that mainstream science is studying the world around us – and also considers our own body and mind as two separate entities that can be studied from without. This high regard for objectivity has not remained limited to scientific world: by regularly emphasizing in the media the importance of 'objective facts' to understand reality, it has managed to become widespread. In our secular, scientific world objectivity has become the norm for everyone to get accurate and reliable knowledge about life that can be applied independent of time and place – and, therefore is considered to have a universal value. Objective knowledge is considered superior to subjective knowledge, which is considered inferior, unreliable, and merely anecdotal.

Yet, we are all born as subjective beings, and our subjective experiences do not stop the moment we start thinking that the only true and trustable

knowledge about life is objective knowledge. As we all know, these experiences continue during our entire life, yet in a devalued way. And it should not surprise us that simultaneously with this devaluation our feelings, intuitions and imaginations also have been devalued, because they are all considered subjective experiences, a part of our subjectivity. Perhaps we do not realize that in this devaluation process we have simultaneously impoverished our life.

My insight into the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity was clarified a lot by the ideas of the Polish philosopher Henryk Skolimowski. In his book *The Participatory Mind* he argued that we are all born with a participatory mind, which is basically subjective, and that we have to make a lot of effort, through a long process that he has called *the Yoga of Objectivity*, to master the objective approach to life.<sup>16</sup> In this objective approach to life, we stop participating in life, and make an attempt to observe life from a distance and exert control from this position. This distance is needed to get objective knowledge about everything that is happening in life, and we can gradually accumulate a growing body of accurate and reliable facts of universal value.

It is important to acknowledge that in this process we learn to objectify life, turn everything into *objects*. In other words, we turn living subjects into dead objects. In this way, we also devalue the unique individual in us, the whole person, and put the emphasis on the ego side of our being; we devalue our inner quality to participate, and thereby to cooperate and be empathic, and put the emphasis on our urge to compete and struggle with others; we devalue our sense of feeling embedded in our own body and in the larger body of the surrounding landscape, and put the emphasis on our sense of separation – being separated from the natural world around us, and also from our own body.

The German biologist Andreas Weber has pointed out that everything that lives has *an inner life* – not only humans, but animal and plants as well. This means they also have subjective experiences. The inner life makes living beings *alive*. According to him, science (and with this, he refers in particular to his own field of biology) has erroneously limited inner life to humans. But we did not always have this scientific outlook. When we began our life, as little children we considered all life as equivalent, possessing an inner life. Only when we got older we have learned that

humans are different, the only ones who are supposed to have an inner life. In Weber's view, however, we can only get nuanced knowledge about life, when are not just looking at life and living beings from without as an objective observer, but when we also acknowledge that all life has an inner life, is always entangled with each other and has subjective experiences.<sup>17</sup> This is, of course, also the position in which we still have access to the Participatory Mind that we are born with. Learning that humans are different, the only ones who possess an inner life, is part of the Yoga of Objectivity. It is ironic that at some point in our life we learn that we humans are the only species with an inner life and subjectivity, and then – probably a bit later in life – disqualify subjectivity again, make it subordinate to objectivity.

Individual development means that we have to reevaluate and rehabilitate our subjectivity, including our feelings, intuitions and imaginations – even to the extent that we realize that objectivity is an artificial way of looking at life that takes years of learning to master. On top of that we must rehabilitate our children's view in which we know that, like us, other living beings also possess an inner life. Of course, we should not get rid of objectivity altogether – after all, our modern society, with all the technological creations that have made our life much more agreeable, has largely been shaped by it. It is important to keep learning and applying objective research, but it has been a mistake that in the process we have devalued our subjective experiences. Objectivity, and the research that has resulted from detaching ourselves as observers from life, should remain subordinate to the subjective experiences of our inner life.

### **Revaluating our vulnerability**

Related to the shift from subjectivity to objectivity is the shift from *vulnerability* to *toughness*. As I said at the start, we are all born as vulnerable beings. Being an individual is to acknowledge the importance of our vulnerability, maintaining our vulnerability during the course of our life, and having the courage to openly express our vulnerability. The American researcher Brené Brown has argued persuasively that courage and vulnerability are deeply connected phenomena. She keeps making the point in several of her books that we tend to think, erroneously, that tough people are courageous. In her view, being courageous has everything to do with

expressing who we truly are, and when we reach down to our deepest level, we find that we are all vulnerable beings.<sup>18</sup>

I think the importance of reevaluating our vulnerability is shown clearly when we have a look at our involvement with warfare. We appear to be not really not made for the tough identity that is attached to the soldier. We are not naturally tough beings and have to go through intense training to make this toughness our own. This toughness involves detaching ourselves from our environment; detaching ourselves from seeing the human in the enemy; detaching ourselves from our own fragile feelings of love and care, from associating ourselves with our individuality, and substituting it with the limited social connection to a group of soldiers and our nationality. However intensely soldiers are trained to detach themselves, being part of a group of soldiers will always remain a poor substitute for a real sense of connection with others and a real sense of belonging to the living land around us.

This process of detaching ourselves is not unlike learning to become objective thinkers, to leave our urge to openly participate in the world around us behind us. But of course the vulnerable part of our being can never be annulated completely. Many soldiers, even the UN soldiers who were sent on peace operations and got the task of not getting involved in the fighting, return home to a civilian life with severe mental problems, suffering from Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A famous study, published under the title *Men Against Fire*, has shown that people are not born to fight: a large percentage of soldiers do not fire their gun at the enemy during warfare.<sup>19</sup> It all shows that we are simply not made to engage in warfare, to be tough and fight each other. The real courage is found in acknowledging this, in accepting that we are vulnerable beings, both in a physical and psychological sense – and in daring to express this vulnerability once again.

### **Presence, aliveness and awareness**

An interesting viewpoint on the matter at hand is offered by Thom Hartmann in his book *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight*. He argues that when we look back over our life we find that ‘there are few crystal-clear moments of vivid memories’. According to him, what these memories have in common is that at these moments we experienced what he calls *presence*.

This is a state of mind, in which we are not thinking, not talking to ourselves in our head, but instead feel very alive and aware – a state that we can also reach through mystical experiences and true meditation. According to Hartmann, from that place of aliveness and awareness, of presence, ‘we can find the ability to transform ourselves and others in ways that can and will transform the world. This seemingly very personal work is actually among the most important things we can do to save the world, because as we become grounded in the present, we gain the power to create change. We also acquire and radiate a spiritual strength – the solidity and reality of spirit that tribal people have known about and used for millennia’.<sup>20</sup>

This is, of course, also what we have known when we were very young and our mind was still in a state of balanced duality. What is interesting about Hartmann’s argument is that he shows that generating changes in the world at large always begins within ourselves: ‘The best way to remake the world is by starting with yourself and your *internal* world.’<sup>21</sup> Importantly, he also emphasizes that history has demonstrated that the deepest and most meaningful changes in the cultural, social and political field have always been initiated by *individuals*. And not – as is often assumed – by organizations, by governments and institutions.<sup>22</sup> And when we dive deeply into our internal world, we do not experience ourselves as egos, or as objective and tough beings, but as sensitive, subjective and vulnerable individuals. In other words, what Hartmann’s argument implies, is that we can only deal successfully with the current polycrisis, by cherishing our individuality, subjectivity and vulnerability.

### **What way will we choose to go further?**

So to be able to deal with the polycrisis that we are confronted with at the moment, it does not help to create a tough appearance and suppress your sensitive side. It does not help either to detach ourselves from the world around you and try to control it objectively from without. And it also does not help to stop developing as an individual. All these things have contributed to bringing us into the current situation of crisis and by continuing on that same track, we will only make matters worse.

I hope I have made it quite clear that it is only by cherishing and developing our individuality, subjectivity and vulnerability that eventually we will collectively be able to move on to a more loving, peaceful,

beautiful, and sustainable world – which is also a more whole world. In this regard, it would already help a lot when some ‘world leaders’ would stop exhibiting themselves with their proud image of toughness and inflexibility, in which they imagine themselves to be exalted above life. Instead of this, they could give a good example: they could gather the courage to descend to their true self – and show the world that at heart they are also just vulnerable beings. But, of course, you should not wait for this to happen. The situation we find ourselves in at the moment is far too urgent. If you have not already done this, take the initiative yourself and make a serious effort to gradually move on to this more whole world – a world in which we all as individuals, as balanced, whole beings, can thrive, and in which our psychological and spiritual wounds are healed as well. You are certainly not alone in this.

Leiden, March 2024

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Dacher Keltner, *Born to be Good, The Science of a Meaningful Life*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Eisenstein, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible*, North Atlantic Books, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Occidental Mythology. The Masks of God*, Penguin, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Baring & Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess. Evolution of an Image*, Penguin, 1991, p. 171.

<sup>5</sup> <https://eng.wimbonis.nl/articles>

<sup>6</sup> You can find more information on my website: <https://eng.wimbonis.nl>

<sup>7</sup> This viewpoint is included in <https://en.m.wikiquote.org>, under David Bohm. It can also be found in a dialogue between Renée Weber and David Bohm, in: Renée Weber, *Dialogues with Scientists and Sages: The Search for Unity*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> J. van Baal, *Man's Quest for Partnership. The Anthropological Foundations of Ethics and Religion*, Van Gorcum, 1981.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Koestler, *The Roots of Coincidence*, Vintage, 1973; Arthur Koestler, *De menselijke tweespalt*, Van Gorcum, 1981 (Dutch translation); Arthur Koestler, *Janus. A Summing up*, Random House, 1981.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Lipton, *The Biology of Belief. Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter and Miracles*, Mountain of Love/Elite Books, 2005, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Steve Taylor, *The Leap. The psychology of spiritual awakening*, Hay House, 2017; Steve Taylor, *Waking from Sleep. Why awakening experiences occur and how to make them permanent*, Hay House, 2010; Steve Taylor, *Extraordinary Awakenings. From Trauma to Transformation*, New World Library, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Scilla Elworthy, *Power & Sex. A Book about Women*, Chrysalis Books, 2003.

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- <sup>13</sup> See for instance: Stephen A. Schwarz, Marjorie Woollacott, Gary E. Schwarz (eds.), *Is Consciousness Primary? Perspectives from Founding Members of the Academy for the Advancement of Postmaterialist Sciences*, AAPS Press, 2020; Mario Beauregard, Gary E. Schwarz, Natalie L. Dyer, Marjorie Woollacott, *Expanding Science. Visions of a Postmaterialist Paradigm*, AAPS Press, 2020; Marjorie Woollacott, *Infinite Awareness. The Awakening of a Scientific Mind*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015.
- <sup>14</sup> Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven. A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife*, Simon & Schuster, 2013; Anita Moorjani, *Dying to be me. My Journey from Cancer, to Near Death, to True Healing*, Hay House, 2014; Nancy Rynes, *Awakenings from the Light. 12 Life Lessons from a Near Death Experience*, Create Space, 2015.
- <sup>15</sup> <https://youtube.com/@AnthonyCheneProductions>
- <sup>16</sup> Henryk Skolimowski, *The Participatory Mind. A New Theory of Knowledge and of the Universe*, Arkana, 1994.
- <sup>17</sup> Robin Atia, 'Bioloog Andreas Weber: 'Zelfs de wind heeft een innerlijk'', *Filosofie Magazine*, maart 2024; Andreas Weber, *The Biology of Wonder. Aliveness and the Metamorphosis of Science*, New Society Publishers, 2016.
- <sup>18</sup> Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly. How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, Penguin Life, 2015; Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection. Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*, Hazelden Publishing, 2010; Brené Brown, *Dare to lead. Brave work. Tough conversations. Whole hearts*, Random House, 2018.
- <sup>19</sup> Marshall, S.L.A., *Men Against Fire*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2000.
- <sup>20</sup> Thom Hartmann, *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight. The Fate of the World and What We Can Do Before It's Too Late*, Third Edition, Harmony Books, New York, 2018, p. 281 and further.
- <sup>21</sup> Thom Hartmann, *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight. The Fate of the World and What We Can Do Before It's Too Late*, Third Edition, Harmony Books, New York, 2018, p. 299.
- <sup>22</sup> Thom Hartmann, *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight. The Fate of the World and What We Can Do Before It's Too Late*, Third Edition, Harmony Books, New York, 2018, p. 390.