

The way of surrendering to life

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Two forms of surrender

When we strongly identify ourselves with our ego, we feel separate from nature and also from other people. Then we want to bring everything under constant control and we have the feeling that life is essentially a dualistic battleground, in which there are only winners and losers. There are plenty of examples of this way of thinking among those in power throughout history and also among today's populist politicians. They follow a path that I call *the path of control and struggle*. On that path, surrender is something that must be avoided at all times. Surrendering oneself is then equivalent to losing, to letting the enemy win and triumph. All their attention is therefore focused on keeping the reins of their acquired power in their hands as firmly as possible.

However, there is a completely different form of surrender that they have largely lost sight of. It can only be found if we also follow another way, which I call *the way of surrendering to life*. On this way, surrender is a very positive phenomenon. It not only provides access to the deeper, authentic side of ourselves that resides in our hearts, but is also a manifestation of it. We feel part of the natural world. Life then includes not only human life, but the whole web of different life forms of which we are also a part, the Earth Community.

The way of Prometheus and of the dolphin

The Irish philosopher and 'modern mystic' John Moriarty has beautifully depicted the difference between the two ways by making a similar distinction between *the way of Prometheus* and *the way of the dolphin*. In his view, we once chose the way of Prometheus, the way on which *we shape nature to suit us*. As is well known, Prometheus is the god from Greek mythology who stole fire from the Olympian gods, and then gave it

to humankind in the form of technology, knowledge and civilization. , According to Moriarty, despite this link to Greek culture the choice for this way was made much earlier, in ancient Mesopotamia.

The name of the way of the dolphin already reveals that this way goes back much further in time. Dolphins are mammals – like us – that once evolved on land, but that – unlike us – at some point, millions of years ago, chose to return to the sea. This way refers to the time when humankind still felt completely absorbed in the immense context of the natural world, and naturally adapted itself to changes in its natural environment. In Moriarty's view, this is the way in which *we let nature shape us to suit it*.

The difference between the two ways is also the difference between placing ourselves outside of nature and ruling over it from that position, and feeling ourselves embedded in nature and experiencing it from within. The way of Prometheus demands control and struggle from us, the way of the dolphin a surrender to life. Moriarty has indicated that we can still choose the path of the dolphin, and that this is even necessary to enable the survival of our culture and society.

The two sides of our dual nature

It is important to recognize that both ways are potentially present in everyone. They reflect the two sides of our dual nature, and the images of humanity and worldviews associated with it. On the way of surrendering to life, we identify ourselves with the deeper side of ourselves, with the thinking through feeling of our hearts, from which we feel inextricably linked to the surrounding natural world and also to our fellow human beings in all their diversity. On this path, on which we all find ourselves when we are born, ‘soft’ human qualities are central such as equality, cooperation, relatedness, connectedness, empathy, openness, compassion and subjectivity.

When the center of our sense of identity shifts after a number of years from the heart to the head, and more specifically to the ego in the left hemisphere of the brain where rational thinking resides, we end up on the road of

control and struggle. Then we started to perceive life through the lens of separation. If we get stuck in that ego-identification, we increasingly lose contact with our deeper connected side. But that does not mean that it will disappear, because it still makes itself heard through dualistic projection. On this way, ‘hard’ human qualities such as dominance, competition, struggle, hierarchy, independence, closedness, dualism and objectivity become central.

The disturbed balance

In Western culture, at some point, the balance in our dual nature has been disturbed, not only in our individual lives, but also collectively in history. From about six thousand years ago, men have come to dominate the development of Western culture and to shape it patriarchally, starting in the city-states of Mesopotamia. Because they had increasingly separated their sense of identity from the natural world, they organized society top-down based on the principle of control and struggle. This development has had a profound impact on the nature of our religious and spiritual experience, and much later also on the practice of science – to this day. In my Dutch book *Het helende verhaal* (The Healing Story), published in 2023, I have written extensively about this.

On the way of control and struggle, the ‘hard’ qualities that were central to it were considered ‘masculine’ by those in power. And the ‘soft’ qualities of the way of surrendering to life were degraded by them to ‘feminine’ qualities. ‘Masculine’ *culture* was placed opposite to, and hierarchically above, ‘feminine’ *nature*. Because the choice for the way of control and struggle was made so long ago – and also more or less coincided with the conventional image of the origin of Western history – the impression has been created that it must always have been this way. Therefore, paradoxically, it could also be assumed that the ‘masculine’ qualities of patriarchal culture have reflected our true nature.

Who we are

By contrasting the way of the dolphin with the way of Prometheus, Moriarty has also clearly shown that the dominance over nature and

patriarchal culture associated with it has not always been there – nor does it reflect our authentic selves. This was preceded by a long period in the cultural development of humankind, in which the way of surrendering to life was central. This was the case when we all still lived as hunter-gatherers. And after that, this cultural way has been able to live on for a long time, with many indigenous communities even to our present day.

If we change to the way of the dolphin, this would not only involve a revival of our original image of humanity and worldview. It would also bring us much closer to who we really are. We would then also realize that it is precisely the human qualities, which were identified as ‘feminine’ in patriarchal culture – including cooperation, openness and connection –, that are a good reflection of who we are as human beings.

Consciousness development

Fortunately, that process of change appears to have started a while ago. From the 18th/19th century onwards, a development of consciousness in this direction slowly started in the Western world. Despite the increased nationalism and materialism in that period, a new consciousness began to come to life in various areas – such as discrimination, the prehistoric past, the experience of nature, psychological development, feminism and even in the field of spirituality. Despite some serious setbacks, including of course the two world wars in the 20th century, that development of consciousness has spread further and further to a planetary scale.

Women's emancipation also played an important role in it. The #MeToo movement has shown that the emancipation of men has yet to get off the ground. In the Netherlands, Jens van Tricht's organization Emancipator has therefore been committed to this men's emancipation for a number of years. However, there is also fierce resistance among men against this whole development of consciousness – instigated by conservative thinkers and populist politicians. In the long run, I think it will turn out that they tried – in vain – to row very hard against the tide of time.

From distrust to trust

We must not forget that hidden behind the patriarchal culture of control and struggle there has always been a spirit of *distrust* of life. There are some elements in our culture that have fed that distrust until recent times.

First of all, the Christian authorities have told people for centuries that because of original sin without the intervention of ecclesiastical control they would always revert to 'evil'. In addition, the ideas of the 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes have also had a great influence on the Western worldview. According to him, human life in the 'state of nature' was characterized by 'a war of all against all', in which life would have been 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. Furthermore, from the 19th century onwards, (neo)Darwinian evolutionary thinking has quite successfully impressed upon us that everything in life is mainly about struggle – the struggle for survival.

It goes without saying that people who have allowed their worldview to be shaped by this, have thereby blocked for themselves the way of surrendering to life! After all, we can only surrender to life when we have let go of this distrust of life and can fully *trust* it again. In this respect, we must become aware that in essence life is good to us.

Doing by Being

Interestingly, the way of surrendering to life was still practiced by the Taoists in ancient China. In this context they spoke of *wu wei*, 'doing by being'. This can be considered as the fertile subsoil from which the doing can grow. Like any tree in a forest, we root ourselves deeper and deeper into the earth in order to continue to grow – to develop the psychological and spiritual potential within ourselves. And as recent scientific research – by Suzanne Simard and others – has made clear, each tree remains connected to all the other trees in the forest through a collaborative network of fungi in that subsoil.

Those who stubbornly cling to the way of control and struggle are like lone trees who think they can survive very well without the fertile soil of the

forest. Without that foundation of being, however, they are driven by restless doing. We can see that they often have little choice but to fight everything and everyone with a lot of fanfare in the media.

Generating a surrender to life

It should be clear that we all benefit from a vision of life in which surrendering to life is in the foreground – with our heart in a leading role and our head in a serving role. What else can we do to activate, strengthen and give a more permanent place to the feeling of surrendering to life in ourselves? I will touch on a few possibilities below.

Surrendering to nature

For example, we could go for a walk in a forest or through a wide landscape. Then, sometimes, we can suddenly be reminded that we are an inseparable part of a much larger reality – of a more-than-human, natural world. If that touches us deeply enough, then the way of surrendering to life opens up for us by itself.

In this context, the Austrian biologist Clemens Arvey has pointed to the healing power of nature. Following the example of the 19th century American psychologist William James, he has distinguished between two forms of attention. Our daily, social activities are dominated by *directed attention*, a form of attention that costs us a lot of energy. In addition, there is also *fascination*, an undirected form of attention. We experience this when we completely surrender to the overwhelming forces of the surrounding natural world, which also pulls our mind *outward*. This form of attention does not cost us any energy at all, but even gives us energy. It offers us healing on a physical, psychological and spiritual level.

The American psychologist Dacher Keltner aptly called these kinds of overwhelming experiences in nature, which literally leave us speechless, *awe experiences*. His research has shown that these experiences also make us more empathetic and friendly towards our fellow human beings. In short, nature helps us to awaken in us the ‘soft’ qualities that have long been considered ‘feminine’ and to make us better people!

Surrendering to our body

Just as we can surrender to the surrounding landscape body, we can also surrender to our own body – a little closer to home. The nature of our body is also always in cyclical motion. We can pay specific attention to this, for example by meditating. Once we have managed to calm the busy ‘thought chatter’ in our heads, we can focus our attention on our breath – and let it be as much as possible for what it is.

In addition, the way of surrendering to life is actually already fully integrated into our lives: after all, we experience it every day when we transition from waking to sleeping. We can only fall asleep if we completely let go of control over life. That feeling of surrender also remains active during sleep. This can make us more aware that the way of control and struggle is limited to our daytime consciousness – and always has been.

Opening up to dissenters

It is important that, by following the way of surrendering to life, we do not feel threatened (anymore) by dissidents. We continue to open up to them. We are then aware that diversity in society, and the tension it can sometimes evoke, is essential for cultural development – and also for our psychological and spiritual growth. This diversity in the human sphere is in line with the biodiversity that has ensured the richness of life throughout the Earth Community.

As long as we continue to follow the way of control and struggle, we will continue to see surrender as losing from an enemy, as something to be avoided as much as possible. But deep from within our hearts, the way of surrendering to life continues to attract us all, no matter what.

Leiden, February 2025

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