

CHAPTER XII: THE ONLY DANCE THERE IS

You can't eat for eight hours a day nor drink for eight hours a day nor make love for eight hours a day--all you can do for eight hours a day is work. Which is the reason that man makes himself and everybody else so miserable and unhappy.
William Faulkner

1. The Loss of Meaning

Several years ago we had a particularly bad spring in our college community. The school is small and students know each other and have a sense of community, and so it was particularly devastating when the students had to face the issue of death on two occasions. The details are not important here: one death was the result of accident; the second was suicide. The point is that there are times in life, occasions which the German philosopher Jaspers calls "border situations," in which we are stretched to our limits and are forced to ask the most basic questions. In particular the question of death inevitably comes back on itself to focus on the question of life: what is the meaning of our existence? Where does the sense of purpose in our lives come from?

But it is not only traumatic events which may turn our minds toward this problem. For many it is everyday existence that seems to be the most poignant reminder of the importance of this question. As Teilhard de Chardin once wrote, too many of us "live lives of quiet desperation." We feel alienated, cut off from our roots without a grounding. Studs Terkel, in Working, his now classic book containing interviews with working people of America, chronicles the satisfactions of some in their jobs but more deeply we hear the agony of the majority.

The way many describe themselves at work is frightening: "I'm a machine," "I am caged," "I'm a mule," "I'm an object," and "I'm a robot." Nora Watson, an editor, put it this way: "I think most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most of us, like the assembly line worker, have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people" (xxix).

Terkel noted that his book was about violence, violence to the spirit as well as to the body. The depth of feeling expressed by many of these people

is chilling, as they described themselves as scarred and drained, needless objects controlled by someone else. Since most of our time is spent at work, for work to be so meaningless and degrading makes too many people feel that their lives, indeed, are ones of quiet desperation. When one adds the hours of television, the propping oneself up in front of the tube for mindless entertainment--not for the enrichment of the soul but its entertainment--we are painting a pretty bleak picture about the ability to achieve meaning in our lives.

Today the yuppie generation seeks to escape this condition by achieving a pleasant "lifestyle," a word that seems to be on everyone's lips. Our answer to the question about the purpose of life seems to revolve around the notion of lifestyle; if only one can achieve the right kind of lifestyle, then life will be meaningful. Yet, when one begins to question what that lifestyle is, with its expensive cars and hot tubs and the right kind of food and clothing and toys, one begins to suspect that this "dream" is simply another form of narcissism, nothing more than a last ditch attempt to avoid facing foursquarely the question of meaning.

But perhaps I am being too harsh for, surely, this attempt to deny the seriousness of deep questions about meaning is not made consciously. It may not be the result of simply refusing to face up to important questions about life, but rather to the lack of a suitable vocabulary for approaching the question appropriately. One purpose of this chapter is to show that our tradition has set up the problem of meaning in such a way that advances in science have virtually undercut the possibility of asking serious questions about meaning in our lives. If this is true, only a radical reconceptualization, a revolution in our basic framework, will allow us to regain a sense of purpose and meaning.

We can begin our analysis of how we have traditionally understood where meaning (or purpose) comes from by returning to the quote earlier in the chapter from Nora Watson who made the distinction between having a calling and having a job. It is the former which would grant meaning, but the problem,

she thought, was that most of us have jobs. It is jobs that are "too small for our spirit," the implication being that a calling would be fully expressive of our spirits.

The notion of calling is a particularly Christian notion, but it has been an important one in our culture, and Nora Watson was right in pointing out the traditional distinction between a calling and a job. One way of making sense of this distinction is for us to analyze what we commonly mean when we say that something has a meaning or a purpose. For instance, take as an example this fountain pen lying in front of me. What is its purpose? Where does it get its purpose?

Purpose Is External

The traditional solution to these questions about purpose is relatively straightforward in this case. Our first response is to point out that the pen itself has no intrinsic purpose. After all, it is simply a conglomeration of material parts, some made of metal and others of plastic. The purpose of the pen, that it is meant for writing, is not something that is inherent in the object, but rather is attributed to it. On the one hand we can say that each individual who uses the pen gives it meaning; insofar as I use the pen for writing, I attach that particular meaning to it. Yet, on a deeper level a more basic notion of its purpose is derived from the individual who first had the idea of making a fountain pen. I do not know the history of fountain pens, but I can well imagine someone finding that the feather pen used too much ink, or she grew tired of constantly sharpening the quill and therefore came up with the idea of the prototype fountain pen. In other words, in the mind of the maker, of the inventor of the fountain pen, there was the idea of an object which was to be used for a particular purpose. In creating the first fountain pen, the inventor also created and attributed to the object a particular purpose.

This is not to deny, of course, that we may use fountain pens for a variety of other purposes, perhaps cleaning our nails when nothing else is available, but the point is that the particular object has been given its

primary purpose by a creator outside of it. Generalizing from this example, we can say that purposes come from the minds of creators. They are given to objects by a mind which stands outside of the object. The only purposes that exist are those which come from outside of the objects and are given to the objects by their makers.

If this analysis of the inception of purpose is correct, when we begin talking about ourselves and not about pens, the question "what is our purpose?" calls for a very specific kind of answer in our tradition. As was the case with the fountain pen, purpose must be given to us by a creator outside of us. For us to have a purpose, for human beings to have a meaning, we must therefore look outside of ourselves for some creator of ourselves and see what that creator had in mind for us.

Using this conception of meaning and purpose, it is altogether natural, therefore, that we look for a traditional religious solution, that we turn to a god for a purpose in life. Just as the pen has no inherent purpose, so we also can have no inherent purpose and therefore we must seek out that purpose in the mind of our Maker. In a world where we have placed everything outside of ourselves in the dualisms of non-participatory consciousness, it is natural that we look outside of ourselves for fulfillment. In the same way that Descartes argued that the material world has no inherent value, so our atomistic tradition gives none to the world, and it requires that we look outside the world and ourselves to a Creator.

It is here that the notion of a "calling" has particular importance; it makes sense within this understanding of purpose. What we ought to seek in life is what we are called to do, that is, what our particular part is in the plan of the creator. To understand what our calling is means that we find our place in the grand scheme of things. As a carburetor has a unique and important role to play in the functioning of an engine, so our calling locates us in our unique role. Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated it the following way: "Learn whom God has ordered you to be, and in what part of human affairs you have been placed" (116). In seeing what purpose has been granted to us, we

discover our special meaning. A calling, therefore, has traditionally implied more than a job since it has cosmic dimensions.

Fulfillment in Human Nature

There is a second notion involved here, also one which is traditional; in fact, it goes back to the Greeks. The idea, one that we have mentioned before, is that the way for humans to achieve happiness is to find what their nature is and to fulfill it. To use a rather far-fetched example, let's go back to the fountain pen and ask, if it could feel happiness, how would it do so? Would it feel happiest when it was being used to clean fingernails or when it was being used for writing? Now, this seems a rather bizarre question, but if we try to answer it we would, I think, naturally say that it is in writing that the pen would fulfill its nature and therefore be happiest.

In the same sort of way, we can ask ourselves what our nature is, and think that in fulfilling that nature, we will also be happy. The Judeo-Christian religion has answered that we are creatures of God and that in fulfilling that purpose we are the happiest. Plato asserted that our nature basically is to reason and so he argued that we are happiest insofar as we reason. Karl Marx argued that our natures are as workers, so it is in creative labor that we fulfill ourselves. I could give other examples, but it is a rather common notion to assume that we are happiest when we are fulfilling our particular nature.

If we combine these two notions--that we are happiest when we fulfill our particular nature, and that purposes have been given to us by a creator--the conclusion is that we find both meaning and happiness when we find what purpose it is that God has for us, when we know our "calling."

I have spent a good deal of time on this particular conception of where we get our purpose in life because I believe that it has been the most important and influential one in Western culture, and it is also the one which has led to what I take to be a crisis in meaning. The crisis comes from two important parts of the argument: that I have no inherent purpose, and that

purpose is given to me from a god/creator. Our culture has increasingly become a secular one. In questioning the existence of God, our tradition has in turn doubted that objects, including humans, have any given nature.

Up until the middle of the nineteenth century virtually everyone accepted the notion of human nature, implying that even if this world is a machine, even if it is a clock, first it was created and wound up. Thus, although the clock had no inherent value or meaning, it received both indirectly from god. Even if God had retired from the everyday job of maintaining this clock, as the Deists asserted, the assumption was that at least the world had been created as God's handiwork and thus displayed in a unique way the signature of God. The attitude of most scientists until the mid-nineteenth century, and many of them like Newton argued for this idea explicitly, was that one function of science was to display the glories of God's handiwork. Far from science undercutting religion, at least in any direct way, the assumption that lay behind the whole scientific enterprise was that there was an ultimate purpose to it all and the traditional notion of finding meaning within the world still held. However, somewhere in the nineteenth century this assumption began to be questioned in a serious way.

The Death Of God

One of the first persons to see the implications of this revolution and to express horror at its implications, even if at the same time he was willing to accept them, was the German existentialist Friedrich Nietzsche. In a now-famous passage, he proclaims the death of God, which means he merely accepts the social fact of this process of the secularization of Western culture, and comments on its profound implications. Let me quote the entire passage:

The Madman. Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, 'I seek God! I seek God!' As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Why, did he get lost? said one. Did he lose his way like a child? said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated?

Thus they yelled and laughed. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his glances. 'Whither is God?' he cried. 'I shall tell you. We have killed him--you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on all the while? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever will be born after us--for the sake of this deed he will be part of a higher history than all history hitherto.'

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they too were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke and went out. 'I come too early,' he said then; 'my time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering--it has not yet reached the ears of man. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars--and yet they have done it themselves' (95-6).

From this perspective, if it is true that there has been an increasing secularization of our culture since the nineteenth century so that it is no longer the case, as commonly assumed, that the traditional religious mode of viewing the world is adequate, then it appears as if life can no longer be meaningful. If our notion of purpose comes from a mind external to the process of life, and if there is question about whether there exists such a creator, then we can have no meaning or purpose in life. This conclusion, of course, mirrors the one discussed earlier when we considered morality. There, we noted

that Albert Camus had said that if there is no God, then everything is permitted, since there is no moral good or evil. Similarly, if there is no God, then everything is permitted, since there is no ultimate meaning in life, nothing to strive for. Every action becomes just like the next one--all lead merely to the drain-hole of existence.

One cannot over-emphasize the importance of this conclusion, for everything that seemed to make sense about the world hinged upon God's existence, and now we have "wiped away the entire horizon." We have "unchained this earth from its sun," and therefore we seem to have no foundation, no basis for meaning, for values, or even for reason itself. Because of this we are "plunging continually, ...straying as through an infinite nothing."

Bertrand Russell has caught the sense of this despair in the following way:

That man is the product of causes which had no provision of the end they were achieving; that his origins, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collections of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion...all the noonday brightness of human genesis are destined to extinction...all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul habitation henceforth be safely built (107).

The French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre has noted that our present

situation is much like the condition of Sisyphus in the famous Myth of Sisyphus. The gods had become angry with Sisyphus and had condemned him to a meaningless life: eternally he had to roll a boulder up a mountain, and when the boulder reached the top of the mountain, it fell back down. Sisyphus then had to trudge back to the base of the mountain, only to begin the process of rolling it back up again.

The tragedy is that, after one has read the interviews in Terkel's book on work, one begins to think that this senselessness is at epidemic proportions in our society. The lives of many seem to be filled with the kind of toil and despair that Sisyphus must feel, a life full of pain and difficulty, with no end, with no purpose, and with no escape short of death.

Reflecting on the spirit of materialism, Henry Adams noted in the early years of the twentieth century that the cult of the dynamo had replaced the cult of the Virgin (or religion). The dynamo, a machine such as the steam engine, which fueled the industrial revolution, provided a dominant image for the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but in fact, the cult of the dynamo is par excellence the cult of alienation.

On the one hand we become alienated from the world, which is viewed as nothing but a machine. Atomism separates us from the world in a profound way, one which has already been pointed out. Yet, it also alienates us from others, who are just as isolated as we are. But by far the most important alienation is that we are alienated even from our own selves. In denying God, the only kind of transcendence that tradition offered us, and in asserting that we are simply a part of a great machine, we seem to have lost the roots that have sustained us and have given us meaning. Our bodies are no longer ours; our souls are no longer ours. Due to atomism, we have become shallow creatures, indeed.

2. The Narcissism of Self

As greater emphasis in the atomistic tradition has been placed on an objective study of the person by science, more pressure has been introduced in nonscientific quarters to understand the self as subjective, and therefore not open to the objective approach of science. As science explicates the person

more and more in objective terminology, there is a reaction in religion as well as in some areas of psychology and philosophy (for example, in existentialism) to emphasize the radical subjectivity of the self; but as this happens, the self becomes more and more hollow, less and less grounded. There doesn't seem to be anything there to grasp.

What is interesting is that the process of losing divine transcendence in the world has resulted in the attempt to make the human self more and more transcendent. As has been pointed out in chapter four, when we lose transcendence we reify the self. The more we believe that God is dead, the more we enliven ourselves; the more we lose God, the more we find a subjective self. The less important the sacred is in our lives, the more importance the self assumes.

This process makes the self more and more hollow on the one hand and yet on the other hand the self assumes more and more importance. After all, this self must bear the burden of replacing the former divine transcendence, and so its existence and nature assume a fundamental importance in our lives. We become, therefore, more and more obsessed with the self, more and more interested in finding out what the self is, while at the same time there seems to be less and less of the self to understand.

In attempting to define the self, two kinds of individualism--both outgrowths of atomism--have become important (see Bellah 27 ff): a utilitarian individualism and an expressive individualism. Utilitarian individualism, based on the utilitarianism that we have discussed earlier, focuses on the desires and pleasures of the individual person. Utilitarianism as a moral view is derived from a psychological theory of the person and of motivation which asserts that what is most essential to the person, what motivates the person, is experiencing pleasure. What is most important to know about ourselves, therefore, is what will bring us pleasure: What are our needs? What are our desires? What is it that will make us happy? These become the fundamental questions, and so we begin to understand ourselves as a bundle of these desires. In utilitarian individualism we want to maximize our own interests,

and that seems to be what the self is all about.

But there is another kind of individualism--expressive individualism -- that has become important in our culture, which is based on a view of the self which says that what life is about is the expression of ourselves and the sharing of authentic feelings. The assumption of expressive individualism is the same as utilitarian individualism, that the self is merely a bundle of needs and desires, and therefore it asserts that we are most truly ourselves when we express those needs and desires. Expressive individualism, therefore, focuses on self-expression as our most basic human activity.

The emphasis on expressing feelings can be a healthy reaction against the crass and materialistic urge in our culture (as engendered by utilitarian individualism) that seems to say that what life is about is "getting what you can." Yet, expressive individualism is no better. Both kinds of individualism are based on the same view of self, that the self is merely an accumulation or bundle of needs and desires and what life is about is knowing what these needs and desires, are and then fulfilling and expressing them. It is just as narcissistic to be concerned with self-expression as to focus on self-getting; both are grounded in the notion of fulfilling an atomistic self.

As Alisdair MacIntyre has pointed out, the therapist--the person most concerned with helping people express themselves--becomes a central model in this culture. But the vision of therapy based on expressive individualism does not connect the individual intimately with others and with society, except to find acceptable means of expressing the needs of the person within that society. Self-expression too often becomes a goal in itself, without any vision of the person as being defined in terms of relationships. Thus, the aim of therapy is not to connect persons with others but merely to express one's atomistic self. As Veroff, Julka, and Douvan have pointed out, "Psychoanalysis (and psychiatry) is the only form of psychic healing that attempts to cure people by detaching them from society and relationships. All other forms--shamanism, faith healing, prayer--bring the community into the healing process, indeed use the interdependence of patient and others as the central mechanism

in the healing process" (*italics mine*) (7).

The emergence of the two strains of individualism have resulted in our culture becoming more focused on our life histories and emotions than ever before. In particular, the idea of expressive individualism has resulted in what Richard Sennett has called a "culture of intimacy," in which warmth, trust, and the open expression of feeling have become the new imperatives. In popular culture we have seen an explosion in the number of books and seminars aimed at finding out what our true feelings are and learning to express them, or learning to be more aggressive so that we can express those feelings.

What is ironic is that such "intimacy" does not express intimacy at all, because at its heart it depends on an atomistic notion of self. Because we are separate, because we have no natural relation to others, we reach out to them by trying to express ourselves. The real me is not bound in intimate relationships to others, but it is separate from them, and a bridge must be built to cross this chasm. The only hope for achieving this connection seems to come from being "totally honest" about oneself. The assumption is that we are essentially private and atomized beings, not social beings.

If we have no common human nature, if we consist of nothing but bundles of desires, and if what is important is that we express these desires, then it makes sense for us to be interested in "lifestyles." What is a lifestyle? The term seems to point not to the depth of the human, but to his or her shallowness. It asserts that what life is about is having a style. Much as clothing styles go in and out, so life has no more depth than expressing oneself in a particular kind of style.

If we are honest, we begin to see the hollowness of this notion of self. As we look around us we see that it is not a positive individuality that is experienced by people, but an anxiety about individual feelings that is experienced, for with this notion of the self, we are constantly asking: Is it honest? Is it really me? Because there is no depth to the self, there is no continuity of the self.

What we have gained in this freedom to be left alone to express ourselves

is loneliness. As Robert Bellah has said, "Freedom to be left alone is a freedom that implies being alone" (23). We become so absorbed in the self, so focused on the individual expression of ourselves, that we have lost our connectedness. Our psyche has become so privatized that each person's self is no longer expressed in freedom but has become one's principle burden. The more shallow the self becomes, the more burdensome it becomes, because one can never fulfill it.

If what life is about becomes the expression of this self, which is in fact no self, then fulfillment in life becomes an impossibility. We can never be happy because we can never fulfill all our desires, since just as soon as one is satisfied, another comes to take its place. That is the aim of Madison Avenue, to assure us that there is always another desire, to convince us that there is another lifestyle that is better and more complete.

3. Play It Again, Sam

In the second section of this chapter we have seen how the notion of the self has been denigrated within the assumptions of atomism and how this has made our search for meaning in life an impossible process. I want to offer now an alternative solution--what I take to be a right-consciousness answer to the problem of meaning brought on by left-consciousness thinking. It is one which involves reconceptualizing who we are as persons along the lines discussed earlier. I can begin this process by once again turning to an idea put forth by the German philosopher, Nietzsche, one which he proposed as a solution to the problem of the lack of meaning, the notion of "eternal recurrence."

Imagine a situation in which life is a process of a constant recurrence, in which everything in your life, every detail, recurred eternally again and again. You would be born of the same parents, brought up in the same town, attend the same schools, and so forth, over and over again. You would have the same job, live the same life, make the same decisions as you have in this life.

You would even be reading this book again, every detail of your life recurring specifically. Of course, you would not remember any former lives, but imagine fully all of these things occurring again and again. What kind of reaction do

you have to this thought-experiment? Is your response the same as Nietzsche had one of his characters respond, "nausea, nausea, nausea?" Does the very thought of reliving your life, going through the events that you have gone through now, bring you nausea, or do you feel that your life has been so true to yourself that you could with joy affirm the notion of eternal recurrence?

Going back to the interviews made by Studs Terkel, I imagine that many of those people, having described themselves as nothing more than robots, would find it excruciatingly painful to conceive of their lives returning again. Is that why Western culture has so often focused so much attention on an afterlife of a qualitatively different sort--as continuing eternally in an afterworld--because we find this life so meaningless?

But what about those of us who would not find it nauseating at all to think of our lives recurring eternally, but rather could joyously affirm such a possibility? What is the difference? It seems that some people have engaged in activities which are more true to their personhood, activities which they would want to engage in any life. Put another way, those people who can joyfully affirm the notion of eternal recurrence are those people who have expressed meaning in their lives. To them there is no "problem" of meaning. But can we characterize these fulfilled lives in a different way from people would who respond negatively to Nietzsche's thought-experiment?

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has studied a group of activities which he calls "flow" experiences, which seem to describe the experiences of individuals who can joyfully affirm their existence. Csikszentmihalyi became interested in activities in which people had fun, and he noticed that the word "flow" kept recurring after studying a wide variety of these experiences which seemed to be rewarding in and of themselves.

We all have had experiences in which we were so engaged in the activity that our attention was focused and we seemed to be fully involved in the action. Consider the surgeon who was so involved in his operation that when the ceiling literally fell all around him, he did not notice it until after he had completed the operation. Or the sports star who is able to tune out thou-

sands of screaming fans and focus completely on shooting the basketball? Or the piano virtuoso who is so completely immersed in playing that for all practical purposes the rest of the world does not exist?

In each of these activities, what seems to be foremost is the complete absorption of the person in the activity. A dancer said of his dance: "If I have enough space, I feel I can radiate an energy into the atmosphere. I can dance for walls, I can dance for floors. I become one with the atmosphere" (Furlong 35). A rock climber said: "It is not moving up but a continuous flowing; you move up only to keep the flow going. There is no possible reason for the climbing except the climbing itself. It is a self-communication" (Furlong 36) The same notion is expressed by Robert Pirsig in his Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance:

To the untrained eye ego-climbing and selfless climbing may appear identical. Both kinds of climbers place one foot in front of the other. Both breathe in and out at the same rate. Both stop when tired. Both go forward when rested. But what a difference! The ego-climber is like an instrument that's out of adjustment. He puts his foot down an instant too soon or too late, he's likely to miss a beautiful passage of sunlight through the trees. He goes on when the sloppiness of his steps shows he's tired. He rests at odd times. He looks up the trail trying to see what's ahead even when he knows what's ahead because he just looked a second before. He goes too fast or too slow for the conditions and when he talks his talk is forever about somewhere else, something else. He's here but he's not here. He rejects the here, he isn't happy with it, wants to be farther up the trail but when he gets there he will be just as unhappy because then it will be 'here.' But what he's looking for, what he wants is all around him, but he doesn't want that because it is

all around him. Every step's an effort both physically and spiritually, because he imagines his goal to be external and distant (206).

Many of the characteristics of the flow experience can be seen in Pirsig's description. Let me mention four of these: a new view of the self, a different view of time, the sufficiency of experience, and concentration. In examining them, we can get a clearer view of an expanded sense of self.

(1) The Flow Experience Has No Subject-Object Distinction

In the flow experience there seems to be a breakdown of the subject-object distinction. A composer told Csikszentmihalyi, "You are in an ecstatic state to such a point that you don't exist" (Furlong 35). There is such an absorption of self in the activity that there is a merging of action and awareness so that there is no distinction between the doer and the deed, no distinction between the subject and the object. The flow experience is a non-dualistic experience.

Take for instance the experience of reading a book that you find terribly enjoyable and enlightening, and imagine yourself reading that book. The experience that you are having is not "I am reading a book," rather it is more accurately described as "an activity of reading." Somehow the self is lost in this particular activity. It is possible to reconstruct, at a later time, the situation so that I can designate a subject who was reading a book, but this is an analysis of the experience after the fact and not a description of what was going on, what was being experienced, as the action was taking place. In flow experiences, the absorption seems to be so complete that there is no separate self.

Compare this experience to reading a book which you dislike. Seemingly at every instant in your reaction to what you are doing, there is the experience of, "I am reading this book--and I do not like it one bit." There is a definite distinction between the self and the not-self. In general, these kinds of experiences are precisely those experiences in which there is no flow,

in which there is no absorption, and which you do not find meaningful. In light of Nietzsche's thought-experiment, the idea of reading an awful book over and over again, eternally, would bring you nausea, but for the dancer or the composer or the surgeon, there is such an appropriateness about the actions--it is so fulfilling to the "self"--that they could recur eternally and be joyfully affirmed.

Notice that what is happening is that we are no longer conceiving of the world in our flow experience as being composed of subjects and objects. Our metaphysics is no longer based upon atoms or entities, but rather on actions. Without the dualism of subject and object, the primary constituents of the world are no longer objects but actions. In these actions there is a merging, an absorption between the localized self and the world.

Just how much absorption there is depends upon a number of things. This question should become the subject of more inquiry, but it is enough here to point out that there are degrees of merging. On the one hand we have the everyday experience of reading the book in which self merges with the book. On the other end of the continuum is the mystical experience in which the mystic feels that she is at one with the entire universe, so completely absorbed in all things that there is absolutely no distinction between subject and any object.

There is an interesting relationship between absorption and meaningfulness. When you turn to the literature of the mystical experience, you find that there is no question about meaning or purpose in life. With ultimate absorption comes ultimate meaning. Problems of meaning arise only with separation of self and the world; it is no wonder that a dualistic metaphysics had to emphasize that meaning was located outside and beyond life, derived from the Creator. Its dualistic description of life left little room for meaning being in any way a natural, inherent property of one's actions.

(2) The Flow Experience Emphasizes the Depth of Time

The flow experience brings a new conception of time. Ordinarily we think of time in a linear manner, with the "arrow of time" pointed in one direction,

from past to future. The present is sandwiched between the past and the future, and this experience of time is unidimensional.

The flow experience suggests that time is polydimensional, that there is not only a "breadth" of time, there is also a "depth" of time. Some people in flow experiences say that time speeds up an incredible amount, while others describe their experience of time as slowing down. But there is more at stake about time here than simply the subjective experience of time as fast or slow as it proceeds toward the future. Just as much as we can conceive of an eternity stretching out into the future, we need to understand that there is an eternity in the present moment. This eternity does not stretch out; rather, it "goes down" so that there is a depth of eternity.

We live in such an instant-replay culture that it is difficult for us to imagine, much less experience, the depth of time. We are so used to thinking of time going forward, so that if we are to recapture an event we must repeat it. This may very well be one reason why reincarnation is becoming so popular an idea in our culture; it is the ultimate notion of instant replay. Alan Watts (54 ff) has pointed out that Eastern religions do not always take the notion of reincarnation as a succession of lives in time but view it as a symbol for the multiplicity of lives that we have in this life. Rather than pointing out that we are a number of persons in succession, reincarnation can be interpreted as emphasizing that we are different people simultaneously. We are not unidimensional persons, but there are, in a sense, multiple persons in us (without our experiencing split-personalities). This notion of reincarnation suggests that we live in layers of time just as there are layers of the self. As the self is deep, so is time. Our problem is that we tend to get stuck in the terminal now, rather than experiencing ourselves in the eternal now.

(3) The Flow Experience Suggests the Sufficiency of the Moment

Along with the notion of the depth of time comes the view that those activities which occur in the eternal now are sufficient. Again, in our instant-replay culture, we seem to want to experience an event over and over

again for it to be enjoyable, but to a person in the flow experience, what is happening at that moment is totally sufficient.

This may be another reason why Western culture has emphasized the afterlife, because it was only in the afterlife that we could find meaning. With only a linear view of time (and if meaning is connected at all to time), more time brings more meaning. Hence, we have needed a notion of eternal life in order to get eternal meaning.

On the other hand, if there is depth to time so that we can experience the eternal now, then we can experience sufficiency in the present. It is no longer necessary for meaning to depend on an afterlife; rather, one can find pure meaning in the present. In flow activities, life is sufficient in itself and can be joyfully affirmed in itself without looking for anything outside it.

In fact, looking outside of my activities may sabotage the experience. Csikszentmihalyi has pointed out that flow experiences are enjoyed by people who are unconcerned with external rewards. In some cases, the fact that there are external rewards, be they monetary rewards or fame, undercuts the possibility of flow experience because people are so concerned with something external to the experience. In the flow experience, one is so merged in the activity that there is absolute unconcern with anything external to that activity.

The notion of the sufficiency of the experience gives us a clue about the meaningfulness of flow experiences, which are not done for anything except themselves. These activities are so appropriate, so expressive of the relational self, so natural, so complete, so deep, that they do not have to receive their value from anything outside of the activity.

(4) The Flow Experience Uses Ritual To Develop Immersion

The last characteristic of the flow experience is that the concentration in the experience seems to be complete. Flow experiences tend to be those in which we are called upon to meet a challenge which is at the limits of our capabilities but does not exceed them. Such activities call for focus and concentration but are not so difficult that we give up and distance ourselves from them.

Csikszentmihalyi pointed out that many people involved in the flow experience had rituals to help focus concentration. Some baseball players would always put one shoe on before the other or a performer would always follow a particular routine. Far from being simply superstitious behavior, these activities are rituals which help focus one's attention and concentration on the activity. One can look at all forms of ritual as serving this function (among others). In ritual behavior, be it in prayer, dancing, burning incense, or putting on the left shoe first, one is beginning to express our ecology with nature. We are moving from a mode of concern about the individual, isolated self to a mode of ecology, of immersion, of heightened awareness. As Gregory Bateson has pointed out, the purpose of the rain dance is primarily not to make "it" rain, but to express the ecological tautology of all of us with nature.

4. Holism and the Dance

In describing their flow experience, people often say that it is like dancing. What is it that happens in a dance and why is the dance an appropriate metaphor for a new way of thinking?

One reason is that dancing emphasizes activity; after all, to dance is to engage in an activity. As opposed to the entity metaphysics of atomism, we have an activity-oriented metaphysics in right-consciousness thinking. Much as we find sub-atomic physics rejecting isolated atoms as defining reality but rather a "mosaic of quavering energy," so what is basic in our explanatory categories are dynamic terms such as action, activity, balance, and energy.

A more important reason, though, is that when one is fully engaged in the dance, the self as center is lost. When I think of the dance I think of Anthony Quinn on the beaches of Crete in the film version of Zorba the Greek, dancing in his ecstasy and his despair, but always it is a total release of the self, a giving up to the forces that surround him.

A final justification for the dance metaphor is that it is a kinesthetic metaphor as opposed to the traditionally dominant visual metaphor of the West.

Being a kinesthetic metaphor, it emphasizes balance; but balance is not static. The notion of balance entails that one has a firm foundation, but it

is one in which there is constant motion and relation to the forces surrounding us: what is important is that we are balanced in total ecology.

What seems to me to be fundamental about our discussion of the flow and of the dance is the rejection of atomism and the acceptance of an activity metaphysics. In activity we are in relationship and we are part of the ecology of nature. Flow experiences are important and meaningful not because we as atomic individuals have created meaning, but because it is in them that we express our ecology with nature.

This book has been about the growing recognition of ecological or holistic thinking in our culture. We have spiraled through a number of ideas, bringing out the atomistic tradition of the West and pointing to the burgeoning array of holistic movements in our culture.

To use the biological metaphor, the quickening of culture has begun. The birth has not taken place. We have not yet seen the face of the new world. All we have at this time are pointers, but they are so numerous and in such a variety of areas that the basic form of our progeny can be seen.

These are exciting times, even if one despairs because of the problems that face civilization. There is no sure formula for success; there is no algorithm for personal and global fulfillment; but let us, like Zorba on the beach in Crete, dance our way into the future, taking on hope and despair, but, above all, being in ecology--in relationship--with ourselves, with others, and with our world.