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The Wisdom of Insecurity

by Alan Watts

The more one studies attempted solutions to problems in politics and economics, in art, philosophy, and religion, the more one has the impression of extremely gifted people wearing out their ingenuity at the impossible and futile task of trying to get the water of life into neat and permanent packages. Religious ideas are like words--of little use, and often misleading, unless you know the concrete realities to which they refer. The word "water" is a useful means of communication amongst those who know water. The same is true of the word and the idea called "God"...The reality which corresponds to "God" and "eternal life" is honest, above-board, plain, and open for all to see. But the seeing requires a correction of mind, just as clear vision sometimes requires a correction of the eyes. Belief clings, but faith lets go...Our minds have been prepared for it by this very collapse of the beliefs in which we have sought security. From a point of view strictly, if strangely, in accord with certain religious traditions, this disappearance of the old rocks and absolutes is no calamity, but rather a blessing. It almost compels us to face reality with open minds, and you can only know God through an open mind just as you can only see the sky through a clear window.

To discover the ultimate Reality of life--the Absolute, the eternal, God--you must cease to try to grasp it in the forms of idols. These idols are not just crude images, such as the mental picture of God as an old gentleman on a golden throne. They are our beliefs, our cherished preconceptions of the truth, which block the unreserved opening of the mind and heart to reality. The legitimate use of images is to express the truth, not to possess it.

"Unless a grain of corn fall into the ground and die, it remains alone. But if it dies, it brings forth much fruit"...What religion calls the vision of God is found in giving up any belief in the idea of God. By the same law of reversed effort, we discover the "infinite" and the "absolute," not by straining to escape from the finite and relative world, but by the most complete acceptance of its limitations. Paradox as it may seem, we likewise find life meaningful only when we have seen that it is without purpose, and know the "mystery of the universe" only when we are convinced that we know nothing about it at all.

Because consciousness *must* involve both pleasure and pain, to strive for pleasure to the exclusion of pain is, in effect, to strive for the loss of consciousness...The greater part of human activity is designed to make permanent those experiences and joys which are only lovable because they are changing. Music is a delight because of its rhythm and flow. Yet the moment you arrest the flow and prolong a note or chord beyond its time, the rhythm is destroyed. Because life is likewise a flowing process, change and death are its necessary parts. To work for their exclusion is to work against life. For change is not merely a force of destruction. Every form is really a pattern of movement, and every living thing is like the river, which, if it did not flow out, would never have been able to flow in. Life and death are not two opposed forces; they are simply two ways of looking at the same force, for the movement of change is as much the builder as the destroyer.

In thinking of ourselves as divided into "I" and "me," we easily forget that consciousness also lives because it is moving. It is as much a part and product of the stream of change as the body and the whole natural world. If you look at it carefully, you will see that consciousness--the thing you call "I"--is really a stream of experiences, of sensations, thoughts, and feelings in constant motion.

But because these experiences include memories, we have the impression that "I" is something solid and still, like a tablet upon which life is writing a record.

The root of the difficulty is that we have developed the power of thinking so rapidly and one-sidedly that we have forgotten the proper relation between thoughts and events, words and things. Conscious thinking has gone ahead and created its own world, and, when this is found to conflict with the real world, we have the sense of a profound discord between the "I," the conscious thinker, and nature.

What we have forgotten is that thoughts and words are *conventions*, and that it is fatal to take conventions too seriously...Thoughts, ideas, and words are "coins" for real things. They are *not* those things, and though they represent them, there are many ways in which they do not correspond at all. As with money and wealth, so with thoughts and things: ideas and words are more or less fixed, whereas real things change.

To define has come to mean almost the same thing as to understand. More important still, words have enabled man to define himself--to label a certain part of his experience "I". Where do I begin and end in space? I have relations to the sun and air which are just as vital parts of my existence as my heart.

Now these are useful words, so long as we treat them as conventions and use them like the imaginary lines of latitude and longitude which are drawn upon maps, but are not actually found upon the face of the earth. But in practice we are all bewitched by words. We confuse them with the real world, and try to live in the real world as if it were the world of words. As a consequence, we are dismayed and dumbfounded when they do not fit. The more we try to live in the world of words, the more we feel isolated and alone, the more all the joy and liveliness of things is exchanged for mere certainty and security.

The scope and purpose of science are woefully misunderstood when the universe which it describes is confused with the universe in which man lives...It is just this reality of the present, this moving, vital *now* which eludes all the definitions and descriptions. Here is the mysterious real world which words and ideas can never pin down. The miracles of technology cause us to live in a hectic, clockwork world that does violence to human biology, enabling us to do nothing but pursue the future faster and faster. Deliberate thought finds itself unable to control the upsurge of the beast in man--a beast more "beastly" than any creature of the wild, maddened and exasperated by the pursuit of illusions. Specialization in verbiage, classification, and mechanized thinking has put man out of touch with many of the marvelous powers of "instinct" which govern his body. It has, furthermore, made him feel utterly separate from the universe and his own "me".

If you ask me to show you God, I will point to the sun, or a tree, or a worm. But if you say, "You mean, then, that God is the sun, the tree, the worm, and all other things?"--I shall have to say that you have missed the point entirely.

Indeed, the special disease of civilized man might be described as a block or schism between his brain (specifically, the cortex) and the rest of his body. This corresponds to the split between "I" and "me," man and nature, and to the confusion of Our oboros, the mixed-up snake, who does not know that his tail belongs with his head.

Since what we know of the future is made up of purely abstract and logical elements--inferences, guesses, deductions--it cannot be eaten, felt, smelled, seen, heard, or otherwise enjoyed. To pursue it is to pursue a constantly retreating phantom, and the faster you chase it, the faster it runs ahead. This is why all the affairs of civilization are rushed, why hardly anyone enjoys what he has, and is forever seeking more and more.

Thus the "brainy" economy...is a fantastic vicious circle which must either manufacture more and more pleasures or collapse--providing a constant titillation of the ears, eyes, and nerve ends with incessant streams of almost inescapable noise and visual distractions. The perfect "subject" for the aims of this economy is the person who continuously itches his ears with the radio, preferably using the portable kind which can go with him at all hours and in all places. His eyes flit without rest from television screen, to newspaper, to magazine, keeping him in a sort of orgasm-without-release through a series of teasing glimpses of shiny automobiles, shiny female bodies, and other sensuous surfaces, interspersed with such restorers of sensitivity--shock treatments--as "human interest" shots of criminals, mangled bodies, wrecked airplanes, prize fights, and burning buildings. The literature or discourse that goes along with this is similarly manufactured to tease without satisfaction, to replace every partial gratification with a new desire.

Generally speaking, the civilized man does not know what he wants. He works for success, fame, a happy marriage, fun, to help other people, or to be a "real person." but these are not real wants because they are not actual things. They are the byproducts, the flavors and atmospheres of real things--shadows which have no existence apart from some substance. Money is the perfect symbol of all such desires, being a mere symbol of real wealth, and to make it one's goal is the most blatant example of confusing measurements with reality.

As in eating his "eyes are bigger than his stomach," so in love he judges woman by standards that are largely visual and cerebral rather than sexual and visceral. He is attracted to his partner by the surface gloss, by the film on the skin rather than the real body. He wants something with a bone structure like a boy's which is supposed to support the exterior curves and smooth undulations of femininity--not a woman but an inflated rubber dream. A less brainy culture would learn to synchronize its body rhythms rather than its clocks...In other words, the interests and goals of rationality are not those of man as a whole organism. If we are to continue to live for the future, and to make the chief work of the mind prediction and calculation, man must eventually become a parasitic appendage to a mass of clock work. There are few grounds for hoping that, in any immediate future, there will be any recovery of social sanity. It would seem that the vicious circle must become yet more intolerable, more blatantly and desperately circular before any large numbers of human beings awaken to the tragic trick which they are playing on themselves. But for those who see clearly that it is a circle and why it is a circle, there is no alternative but to stop circling. For as soon as you see the whole circle, the illusion that the head is separate from the tail disappears.

The question "What shall we do about it?" is only asked by those who do not understand the problem. If a problem can be solved at all, to understand it and to know what to do about it are the same thing...You have to see and feel what you are experiencing as it *is*, and not as it is named. This very simple "opening of the eyes" brings about the most extraordinary transformation of understanding and living, and shows that many of our most baffling problems are pure illusion. This may sound like an over-simplification because most people imagine themselves to be fully enough aware of the present already, but we shall see that this is far from true.

We can hardly begin to consider this problem unless it is clear that the craving for security is itself a pain and a contradiction, and that the more we pursue it, the more painful it becomes. This is true in whatever form security may be conceived. Here lies the crux of the matter. To stand face to face with insecurity is still not to understand it. To understand it, you must not face it but be it.

Understanding comes through awareness. Can we, then, approach our experience--our sensations, feelings, and thoughts--quite simply, as if we had never known them before, and, without prejudice, look at what is going on? You may ask, "Which experiences, which sensations and feelings, shall

we look at?" I will answer, "Which ones *can* you look at?" The answer is that you must look at the ones you have *now*. We are seeing, then, that our experience is altogether momentary. From one point of view, each moment is so elusive and so brief that we cannot even think about it before it has gone. From another point of view, this moment is always here, since we know no other moment than the present moment. It is always dying, always becoming past more rapidly than imagination can conceive. Yet at the same time it is always being born, always new, emerging just as rapidly from that complete unknown which we call the future. Thinking about it almost makes you breathless.

While you are watching this present experience, are you aware of *someone* watching it? Can you find, in addition to the experience itself, an experiencer? Can you, at the same time, read *this* sentence and think about yourself reading it? You will find that, to think about yourself reading it, you must for a brief second stop reading. The first experience is reading. The second experience is the thought, "I am reading." ...Never at any time were you able to separate yourself from your present thought, or your present experience. The first present experience was reading. When you tried to think about yourself reading, the experience changed, and the next present experience was the thought, "I am reading." You could not separate yourself from this experience without passing on to another...You were never able to separate the thinker from the thought, the knower from the known. All you ever found was a new thought, a new experience.

To be aware, then, is to be aware of thoughts, feelings, sensations, desires, and all other forms of experience. Never at any time are you aware of anything which is *not* experience, not a thought or feeling, but instead an experiencer, thinker, or feeling. If this is so, then what makes us think that any such thing exists?

The notion of a separate thinker, of an "I" distinct from experience, comes from memory and from the rapidity with which thought changes. It is like whirling a burning stick to give the illusion of a continuous circle of fire...When you see clearly that memory is a form of present experience, it will be obvious that trying to separate yourself from this experience is as impossible as trying to make your teeth bite themselves. There is simply experience. There is not something or someone experiencing experience! You do not feel feelings, think thoughts, or sense sensations any more than you hear hearing, see sight, or smell smelling.

We are not trying to have an "intellectual discussion." We are being aware of the fact that any separate "I" who thinks thoughts and experiences experience is an illusion. To understand this is to realize that life is entirely momentary, that there is neither permanence nor security, and that there is no "I" which can be protected.

The real reason why human life can be so utterly exasperating and frustrating is not because there are facts called death, pain, fear, or hunger. The madness of the thing is that when such facts are present, we circle, buzz, writhe, and whirl, trying to get the "I" out of the experience. We pretend that we are amoebas, and try to protect ourselves from life by splitting in two. Sanity, wholeness, and integration lie in the realization that we are not divided, that man and his present experience are one, and that no separate "I" or mind can be found.

While the notion that I am separate from my experience remains, there is confusion and turmoil. Because of this, there is neither awareness nor understanding of experience, and thus no real possibility of assimilating it. To understand this moment I must not try to be divided from it; I must be aware of it with my whole being...To understand music, you must listen to it. But so long as you are thinking, "*I am listening to this music,*" you are not listening. To understand joy or fear,

you must be wholly and undividedly aware of it. So long as you are calling it names and saying, "I am happy," or "I am afraid," you are not being aware of it.

Even in our most apparently self-conscious moments, the "self" of which we are conscious is always some particular feeling or sensation--of muscular tensions, of warmth or cold, of pain or irritation, of breath or of pulsing blood. There is never a sensation of what senses sensations, just as there is no meaning or possibility in the notion of smelling one's nose or kissing one's own lips.

...With the arrival of pain, whether physical or emotional, whether actual or anticipated, the split begins and the circle goes round and round. As soon as it becomes clear that "I" cannot possibly escape from the reality of the present, since "I" is nothing other than what I know now, this inner turmoil must stop. No possibility remains but to be aware of pain, fear, boredom, or grief in the same complete way that one is aware of pleasure. The human organism has the most wonderful powers of adaptation to both physical and psychological pain. But these can only come into full play when the pain is not being constantly re stimulated by this inner effort to get away from it, to separate the "I" from the feeling. The effort creates a state of tension in which the pain thrives. But when the tension ceases, mind and body begin to absorb the pain as water reacts to a blow or cut.

If...you are aware of fear, you realize that, because this feeling is now yourself, escape is impossible. You see that calling it "fear" tells you little or nothing about it, for the comparison and the naming is based, not on past experience, but on memory. You have then no choice but to be aware of it with your whole being as an entirely new experience. Indeed, *every* experience is in this sense new, and at every moment of our lives we are in the midst of the new and unknown.

Sometimes, when resistance ceases, the pain simply goes away or dwindles to an easily tolerable ache. At other times it remains, but the absence of any resistance brings about a way of feeling pain so unfamiliar as to be hard to describe. The pain is no longer *problematic*. I feel it, but there is no urge to get rid of it, for I have discovered that pain and the effort to be separate from it are the same thing. wanting to get out of pain *is* the pain; it is not the "reaction" of an "I" distinct from the pain. When you discover this, the desire to escape "merges" into the pain itself and *vanishes*....

You will cease to feel isolated when you recognize, for example, that you do not *have* a sensation of the sky: you *are* that sensation...Man has to discover that everything which he beholds in nature--the clammy foreign-feeling world of the ocean's depths, the wastes of ice, the reptiles of the swamp, the spiders and scorpions, the deserts of lifeless planets--has its counterpart within himself.

One can only attempt a rational, descriptive philosophy of the universe on the assumption that one is totally separate from it. But if you and your thoughts are part of this universe, you cannot stand outside them to describe them...As the philosopher tries to stand outside himself and his thought, so, as we have seen, the ordinary man tries to stand outside himself and his emotions and sensations, his feelings and desires. The result is a fantastic confusion and misdirection of conduct which discovery of the mind's unity must bring to an end....

What is the difference between "me" and "mental mechanisms" whether conscious or unconscious? *Who* is being moved by these processes? The notion that anyone is being motivated comes from the persisting illusion of "I." The real man, the organism-in-relation-to-the-universe, *is* this unconscious motivation. It is easy to see that most of the acts which, in conventional morals, are called evil can be traced to the divided mind.

By far the greater part of these acts come from exaggerated desires, desires for things which are not even remotely necessary for the health of mind and body, granting that "health" is a relative term. Such outlandish and insatiable desires come into being because man is exploiting his appetites to give the "I" a sense of security. So long as there is the motive to become something, so long as the mind believes in the possibility of escape from what it is at this moment, there can be no freedom. Virtue will be pursued for exactly the same reason as vice, and good and evil will alternate as the opposite poles of a single circle.

Of course it *sounds* as if it were the most abject fatalism to have to admit that I am what I am, and that no escape or division is possible. It seems that if I *am* afraid, then I am "stuck" with fear. But in fact I am chained to the fear only so long as I am trying to get away from it. On the other hand, when I do not try to get away I discover that there is nothing "stuck" or fixed about the reality of the moment. When I am aware of this feeling without naming it, without calling it "fear," "bad," "negative," etc., it changes instantly into something else, and life moves freely ahead. Love is the organizing and unifying principle which makes the world a *universe* and the disintegrated mass a community. It is the very essence and character of mind, and becomes manifest in action when the mind is whole.

Nothing is really more inhuman than human relations based on morals. When a man gives bread in order to be charitable, lives with a woman in order to be faithful, eats with a Negro in order to be unprejudiced, and refuses to kill in order to be peaceful, he is as cold as a clam. He does not actually see the other person. Only a little less chilly is the benevolence springing from pity, which acts to remove suffering because it finds the sight of it disgusting. But there is no formula for generating the authentic warmth of love....Now it should be clear that eternal life is the realization that the present is the only reality, and that past and future can be distinguished from it in a conventional sense alone. The moment is the "door of heaven," the "straight and narrow way that lea deth unto life," because there is no room in it for the separate "I"

...Eternal life is realized when the last trace of difference between "I" and "now" has vanished--when there is just this "now" and nothing else. The timid mind shuts this window with a bang, and is silent and thoughtless about what it does not know in order to chatter the more about what it thinks it knows. It fills up the uncharted spaces with mere repetition of what has already been explored. But the open mind knows that the most minutely explored territories have not really been known at all, but only marked and measured a thousand times over. And the fascinating mystery of *what* it is that we mark and measure must in the end "tease us out of thought" until the mind forgets to circle and to pursue its own processes, and becomes aware that to *be* at this moment is pure miracle.