
EDUCATING FOR SELF-TRANSCENDENCE
AND THE PLURALISTIC IDENTITY

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Social life in a diverse, democratic society requires a *pluralistic identity*. The pluralistic identity is one that harmoniously integrates the three levels of human identity implicit within each individual self: 1) that identity which is unique and idiosyncratic; 2) that identity defining an ethnic or cultural tradition which is shared with a community and 3) that identity which defines our commonality and distinguishes the shared features of all human life. The individual *self* with a mature pluralistic identity, is best prepared for creating and optimizing the human relations that sustain life in a democracy. This is because, as John Dewey once observed, democracy is more than just a form of government: it is a mode of “associated living” in which individuals generate common interests which guide their social conduct along mutually acceptable standards.¹ That is, social harmony is generated through dialogue, persuasion and consensus rather than coercion, force and intimidation. A pluralistic identity may be the foundation of social pluralism and tolerance, since it would be capable of understanding and appreciating the perspectives of other individuals and groups. Consequently such an identity should be the goal of the educational institutions of a democratic society, since it constitutes what may be deemed the entry skills for identifying common interests and thereby sustaining and optimizing social life.

In many respects, the pluralistic identity may be viewed as an example of what Abraham Maslow described as the *transpersonal identity*.² The transpersonal identity, however not only appreciates the commonality among the diverse peoples which represent the human community, but it respects the value of non-human life forms as well. However, the pluralistic or transpersonal identity is, as Maslow recognized, inextricably linked to the experience of *self-transcendence*. In many respects, such an experience is deemed the *sine qua non* of a transpersonal, pluralistic identity. Consequently, in the endeavor to advance a philosophy of education that has as its principal goal the pluralistic identity, one must be prepared to advance a coherent theory of self-transcendence upon which this educational philosophy would be based.

Until recently, the notion of self-transcendence as an educational goal must have seemed unthinkable for all but Bible Schools. Yet, recent developments from neuroscience and psychology have provided a firmer basis upon which the educational theory of transcendence can be grounded. Some of this research has been conducted and discussed by two neuroscientists, Andrew Newberg and Eugene D’Aquili in their book *Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and The Biology of Belief*.³ In their text, Newberg and D’Aquili provide an

assessment of the human brain while undergoing an experience of self-transcendence. Many of their ideas, however, were clearly anticipated and illuminated through Aldous Huxley's earlier writings on *visionary experience*. In a related development, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow* has also emerged as a descriptor of a form of self-transcendence that is widely experienced and readily accessible when the requisite efforts and conditions are created.

This paper then, will have three purposes: first, to advance a theory of self-transcendence which appears to be emerging from the above cited theorists and to examine its relevance to the pluralistic identity; secondly this paper will seek to spell out the pedagogical model implied by that theory through a consideration of the mechanisms that foster self-transcendence; and thirdly we will consider the challenges of advancing such a theory as a guide to public education in a pluralistic, democratic society.

SELF-TRANSCENDENCE AND HUMAN NATURE

Writing over 40 years ago, Aldous Huxley once observed that as humans we have a "deep-seated urge to self-transcendence." As he declared, "always and everywhere, human beings have felt the radical inadequacy of their personal existence, the misery of being their insulated selves and not something else, something wider."⁴ Consequently, the urge toward self-transcendence is an urge for a kind of liberation that goes beyond the limits of the insulated ego.

What complicates the basic human urge toward self-transcendence, making its fulfillment problematic, is the fact that humans may, as Huxley wrote, seek self-transcendence "downward" as well as "upward." Downward transcendence is exemplified by alcoholic intoxication and other "toxic short cuts" toward self-transcendence. In addition, self-transcendence in the downward direction may be sought in what Huxley terms "herd poison" or "crowd intoxication."⁵ What distinguishes these two routes to self-transcendence as "downward" and undesirable is that such indulgences undermine our autonomy, our powers of reasoning, and our capacity for moral choice. Furthermore downward transcendence whether in the form of alcoholic or crowd intoxication undermines our capacity for "upward" or psychologically healthy transcendence. Yet, as Huxley suggests, downward transcendence becomes a more prominent option specifically when we fail to successfully foster upward transcendence. This is, perhaps, the most compelling reason why healthy self-transcendence is an essential educational objective, worthy of life-long pursuit.

There are two aspects of "upward" transcendence that makes it "healthy" and desirable: first, it may be seen to characterize the fulfillment of our biologically driven quest for a mature identity which has been described in the work of both Erik Erikson and Abraham Maslow; and secondly, such

transcendence is *empowering* insofar as it marks an enhancement of our capacity to function autonomously inside—as opposed to escape from, or submerge within—the society in which we happen to reside.

In the first respect, self-transcendence is to be seen, perhaps paradoxically, as the consummation of our biologically driven movement toward a mature identity. Growth along this continuum is a maturation process that ensues through successive periods of our life. In terms of the work of Erik Erikson, the growth of ego-identity marks successive transitions that distinguish an ever “widening social radius.”⁶ Preferably, this widening social radius begins with one’s principal caregivers as a child and ends with mankind in general—although in most instances it does not. Rather, in Erikson’s terms, ego development more often terminates in a narrow, exclusive identification with one’s “significant” social group: e.g., tribe, extended family, ethnic-religious demographic, or nation. While such identities have become increasingly tolerated in our pluralistic society, these identities alone fall short of the pluralistic identity which assures mutual respect, tolerance and common interests among diverse populations. Herein emerges a conundrum of the modern as well as the postmodern world: how does a society provide for the development of this wider pluralistic identity without suppressing diversity or fostering the kind of nationalistic or tribal identity that may be said to distinguish the politics of infra-human primates (i.e., us versus them)? I would like to suggest that such an identity (us versus them) *must* emerge at some point of individual growth: making a measure of identity politics an inevitable feature of the maturing self. Significant problems ensue, however when this identity is not fostered successfully or when the individual’s development is arrested at this or any other juncture in the process of maturation—short of the advancement of a pluralistic identity. Regardless, however, of which point on the continuum of identity development growth is arrested, when the quest for a wider identity is thwarted downward transcendence emerges as an increasingly compelling option—if for no other reason than to assuage the truncated identity. And as Abraham Maslow maintained, the truncated identity is a crippled identity.⁷

Maslow argued that when our movement toward a wider identity is thwarted, it has pathological results. Such an identity is deemed crippled since it has not consummated its basic quest and must remain, as Huxley wrote, “in the misery of being an insulated self, not something wider.” Such a limited identity may thereby account for the human proclivity toward tribal, nationalistic wars, and/or the form of cultural conflicts that now consumes factions within the Western World and between that world and portions of the Arab World. Furthermore, one may identify widespread substance abuse and other forms of self and socially destructive behaviors as another external consequence of individuals who have failed to move toward self-transcendence and a pluralistic identity.

As suggested, the second aspect of “upward” transcendence that makes it desirable, is the idea that by fostering a pluralistic identity the individual is empowered and rendered more capable of functioning as a productive member of a society—especially a pluralistic society—without merely “adjusting” to social conventions in a thoughtless or gullible way for the sake of conformity. This empowerment takes the form of an enhanced capacity to understand and appreciate competing perspectives—thereby advancing the pursuit of a common ground upon which compromise and conflict resolution are advanced. Indeed, this is an individual who is not only a productive member of his or her culture and a patriotic appraiser of its strengths, but also an autonomous critic of that culture’s weaknesses. Such an individual is fully aware of the relativity of the values and conventions of his or her culture vis-à-vis other cultures, past and present. The transpersonal identity however, is not a static end. As stated earlier, it represents the entry skills for truly productive citizenship in a pluralistic, democratic society like our own.

How then does a society foster self-transcendence and the adult identity? Traditional societies have not been as clueless as we now appear regarding the social mechanisms by which an adult identity and social cohesion are fostered. This was the traditional function of *puberty rites*. That is, the purpose of puberty rites was not only to mark the physical transition to adulthood, but also to secure the individual’s commitment to the broader, social community. There are apparently good reasons for marking this transition in a socially—and individually—constructive way. The adolescent has, as Erikson reminds us, an “ideological mind” which is ready to have ideals confirmed by others through rituals, creeds and programs.⁸ In the absence of a “program” introduced by mentoring adults, however, human development is arrested in adolescence. Such an individual is more prone toward various forms of substance abuse, crowd intoxication or other forms of socially destructive behaviors.

Nonetheless, it would be misleading to overlook the manner in which some traditional societies employed cruel or inhumane practices in the name of puberty rites (like contemporary hazing ordeals)—specifically for the purpose of marking the transition from childhood into the adult community. Female genital mutilation is but one example in which domination rather than liberation and social cohesion appears to be the primary purpose. Equally offensive are those practices that aim at indoctrinating youth into blind, uncritical religious dogmas or tribal/ethnic nationalism. In rejecting such practices, we must be mindful of not throwing out the proverbial baby with the bath water. By eliminating all significant rites of passage in the process of eliminating the inhumane and anti-democratic ones, we merely replace a crime of commission with an equally problematic “crime” of omission—where we fail to provide for an important experience that marks the transition from youth to adulthood—

from youth identity to a more pluralistic, adult identity. Requiring high school students to perform community service, as a graduation requirement is perhaps a well-intentioned if meager attempt to foster a broader commitment to the student's community (and an adult identity). In his final novel *Island*, as we will consider, Aldous Huxley sought to remedy this very problem. But to do so involves the presence of mentoring adults who systematically foster an experience of self-transcendence that will mark the transition to a mature pluralistic adult identity. At this point then, we need to examine the model of self-transcendence emerging from modern science. It is within such a context that we can appreciate the potential role a rite of passage may play for the young in fostering self-transcendence and identity reformation.

SELF-TRANSCENDENCE AND THE BRAIN

Aldous Huxley anticipated recent research on the brain and its relation to self-transcendence, when he observed that visionary experiences, as a generic category of human experience, is defined by a continuum: this continuum comprises various degrees of self-transcendence. At one end of this continuum lies experiences conventionally described as *aesthetic* in nature; at the other end we find the experience of "mystical consciousness"⁹ In between these two extremes, Huxley described a distinctive form of visionary experience: while this experience is more intense and latent with meanings than aesthetic experience, unlike mystical consciousness this form of visionary experience is characterized by distinct value dichotomies: good and evil, heaven and hell (us and them). Within this aspect of visionary experience we are still likely to find the impact of unique individual and/or cultural dispositions. That is, these powerful experiences are shaped and interpreted through the refracting lens of culture and personal biases; yet individuals who access this realm of experience are nonetheless likely to place universal significance (and accompanying claims to exclusive truth) upon the insights and meanings they access through such revelations. This is well illustrated in the emergence of terms like "manifest destiny" and "promised land": terms which have at various times defined a visionary ideal in American and Hebrew cultures respectively. Yet, each of these "visions" could be viewed by opposing cultures as disastrous: e.g., Native American and Palestinian.

Mystical consciousness, on the other hand, represents a most extreme form of transcendence that reflects a marked contrast to other "visionary" experiences. In mystical consciousness opposites become reconciled in an experience of unity. It is by virtue of mystical consciousness, that identity is no longer defined solely by one's membership in a specific culture or group. Rather, deeply embedded in such an experience is an underlying awareness of our ultimate, *transpersonal identity*: at once individual and idiosyncratic as well as culturally relative or tribal—yet it is also an identity that defines the basic

common denominators of human and trans-human life. This then is the foundation of the pluralistic identity.

As suggested, most recently elements of Huxley's theory have received compelling support and clarification through the research of two neuroscientists: Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili. The key concept to emerge from their research is the concept of *deafferentation*. In neurological parlance, this term identifies what is happening to the brain when the orientation area (that which *orients* us to the world in which we normally act) is forced to operate on little or no neural input. Deafferentation is fostered by contemplative techniques as well as a variety of activities that require the intense focusing of the mind—and hence the reduction of the usual cacophony of neural input ordinarily entering the brain from the outer environment. The result of this deafferentation appears to be “a softer, less precise definition of the boundaries of the self.”¹⁰ Yet the actual impact of this experience on the individual's self and identity may vary. Such variation emerges on account of the varying *intensities* that may distinguish the process of deafferentation. In other words, like Huxley, Newberg and D'Aquili point out that one may identify a *continuum* along which higher or lower levels of *deafferentation* (self-transcendence) may take place. Accordingly, one may experience total deafferentation of the orientation area of the brain as a marker of what Huxley—as well as Newberg and D'Aquili—identifies as mystical consciousness; or, if the deafferentation is not complete, then the subjective experience that results falls under the category of what Huxley termed “visionary experience” or what Newberg and D'Aquili called *partial deafferentation*. These experiences retain large portions of the individual and cultural references that customarily define identity. This is the reason Huxley acknowledged the mixed blessings of those emotionally charged memories which form the cornerstone of all religious traditions and underlie all visionary experiences. Such experiences have not only lent themselves to the formation of organized religions, and accompanying political and cultural traditions, but they have also frequently fostered mutual intolerance between themselves and what are perceived as competing traditions of visionary experience (revealing once again the dualistic nature of visionary experience). One needs only to consider the competing visions of a Martin Luther, John Smith or Mohammed to appreciate the potential misunderstandings which may reinforce narrow tribal, ethnic or national identities. This, it would appear, may be a common characteristic of *partial deafferentation* as a form of visionary experience. Despite this observation, Huxley nonetheless deemed self-transcendence an important educational objective—only he understood that full deafferentation (not partial) is what is required. Not surprisingly, these ideas emerge in Huxley's final novel *Island*, providing a context for considering the pedagogical implications of our discussion.

PEDAGOGY AND SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

In his final novel, *Island* Huxley set out to depict his own vision of a society—and its educational institutions—which sought to nurture our need for self-transcendence. First and foremost regarding the educational priorities on the island of “Pala” which is depicted in this novel is the need to recognize that education must not be limited to a narrow concern for the mind. Yet, “physical education” as conventionally understood does not encompass what dominates Huxley’s theory and the educational philosophy of the Palanese. Rather, for Huxley and the Palanese, the principal goal of education is to nurture the “mind-body” or what Huxley referred to as the *psychophysical instrument*.¹¹ Accordingly, while dance and various forms of physical activity and training are important parts of the educational curriculum of the Palanese, it is in large measure on account of their appreciation for the importance of educating the “mind-body” that the citizens of Huxley’s *Island* place such a premium on the educational value of rock-climbing. Indeed, as Huxley has the Palanese point out, “rock climbing is an integral part of the school curriculum.”¹²

It is important to observe that the significance of rock-climbing does not lie so much in any special virtue in climbing rocks per se. Rather, rock climbing’s significance emerges in the role that this discipline plays in focusing the mind, and in a small way, facilitating the deafferentation of the rock climber’s brain. This may seem paradoxical given the observation that deafferentation involves the restriction of neural input from the outside—something a rock climber would not appear to want to do. Yet, it is the intense focusing of the mind in the midst of a challenging physical activity that may also precipitate a limited visionary experience: what has more recently been described as a *flow* experience.¹³ For this very purpose, Huxley might just as well have chosen one of the martial arts—rather than rock climbing—as a central focus in his island’s scheme of non-verbal, *psychophysical* education.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has outlined what gives an activity like rock climbing the potential for precipitating flow and self-transcendence. As Csikszentmihalyi indicates, what gives such an activity the potential for inducing a flow experience, is that when properly undertaken over a period of time, it demands that the participant engage in challenges of ever increasing complexity which thereby nurture the mind’s capacity for concentration, patience and discipline. Under such circumstances the mere climbing of rocks becomes something much more. As Csikszentmihalyi has written, when “all of a person’s relevant skills are needed to cope with the challenges of a situation, that person’s attention is completely absorbed by the activity.” As a result of this intense concentration in the midst of an activity for which one has been trained, there emerges *flow*, when “the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic.” At these moments participants may “stop being aware of themselves as separate

from the actions they are performing.”¹⁴ Under such circumstances, where one invests all of her psychic energy into an interaction, an opportunity is created to reduce our ordinary preoccupation with our selves. This loss of self-consciousness then, Csikszentmihalyi concludes, “can lead to self-transcendence” and the expansion of the self’s ordinary boundaries—i.e. *deafferentation*.

Among the requisite strategies for advancing a measure of self-transcendence—or *deafferentation*—in the young is to provide them with some form of activity, shared with a group and led by competent adults, which demands the kind of mind-body development that makes flow possible. By advancing self-transcendence and helping the young create *internal* references for their well-being, we not only reduce their dependence upon *external* references such as name-brand clothing, but we also reduce the likelihood that they will pursue downward transcendence—substance abuse, crowd intoxication and an unhealthy infatuation with our media and a popular culture, which advances a message, that is diametrically opposed to the pursuit of flow and self-transcendence. This message is that our well-being can only be enhanced through the acquisition of an *external* appearance that focuses overwhelmingly on consumer purchasing.

While the concept of flow helps us begin to appreciate the rationale for the importance Huxley ascribes to rock climbing on the isle of Pala, he extends its significance yet further: a critical, particularly difficult rock climbing challenge is required of all Palanese adolescents as part of their rite of passage into adulthood. This challenging task is immediately followed by their first religious initiation. By including a ritual ceremony that marks the passage to adulthood for the adolescents on Pala, Huxley once again shows an appreciation for a process only recently illuminated by the research of Newberg and D’Aquili: namely the role of ritualized activities and ceremonies for promoting social cohesion through their capacity to foster a measure of deafferentation and thus self transcendence.¹⁵

While the research of Newberg and D’Aquili may provide an insight into why a ritual plays a prominent role in the education of the youth on Huxley’s island, we must not overlook the potential problems which (noted above) Huxley also recognized may accompany widely shared emotional memories fostered by a collective rite of passage: i.e., a hostile disposition to “non-members” or outsiders. Consequently, to remedy this limitation of what we now can now term “partial deafferentation” Huxley’s island culture of Pala adopted and advanced two corrective measures: the practice of meditation and the ingestion of *moksha*—a mind-altering mushroom. Each of these was deemed essential for promoting mystical consciousness. It is during their rite of passage that the Palanese adolescent is first exposed to the “moksha-medicine”—a central element of their religious observation.

At this juncture, we may begin to place in its proper context Huxley's involvement with, and limited advocacy of, such mind-altering substances as his "moksha-medicine." Huxley recognized that without a means of assuring an individual's experience of *full* deafferentation of the brain, a pluralistic, transpersonal identity may not emerge.

CONCLUSION

Initiating the social-educational reforms implicit in our discussion entails challenges that may be insurmountable. Clearly, the use of mind-altering substances defines one of these challenges. The distinction Huxley wishes us to make between the type of substances he depicts in *Island*, and other "toxic short cuts to transcendence" (i.e., alcoholic intoxication) is unlikely to be appreciated in our society's current social climate. But even here, the Palanese of *Island* would be quick to point out that no single feature or social-educational policy they implement is by itself sufficient. Rather, as they emphasized "nothing short of everything will really do"—i.e., a full range of social and educational policies that operate outside as well as inside the school is required to properly educate the young.¹⁶ By itself, the moksha-medicine could very well become dangerous and disruptive to a society—perhaps in ways that are now seen to characterize the 1960's. Consequently, regardless of our impression of Huxley's limited advocacy of a mind-altering substance, he would nonetheless emphasize that the important educational idea is to competently and *completely* address all of our developmental needs—including our need for self-transcendence.

By the end of his life, Huxley was troubled by the extent to which schooling fails to address our developmental needs competently—choosing instead to employ an approach to education that is highly verbal in nature. The problem with an education that is overly focused on verbal skills, is that it overlooks what Huxley refers to as "Gresham's Law" applied to language: bad words tend to drive out good words, and words in general, the good and the bad, tend to drive out immediate experience and our memories of immediate experience.¹⁷ Consequently, schooling is not simply incomplete when it focuses exclusively on the use of language, it is positively dangerous, since it fails to prepare the student for the inevitable encounter with narrowly conceived, culturally and temporally relative doctrines and ideologies: especially those doctrines and ideologies that are inspired by visionary experience and which foster a mutually exclusive relation with competing visionary experiences and their doctrines and ideologies. All of these religious doctrines and ideologies—while originally inspired by visionary experience—are themselves artifices of words created by others which compel us to forsake our own personal experience in favor of the visions and emotional memories of someone else—past or present. The advocacy of "critical thinking skills" alone to remedy this challenge would be viewed by Huxley as a misreading of our developmental needs. It reflects

more of the same logical, verbal bias that already affects so much of our school life. It is, one may say, in this realm of culturally shaped and interpreted visionary experience (or *partial* deafferentation) that there may emerge the motivation and the strange logic that compels a so-called “martyr” to fly airplanes into skyscrapers.

Nonetheless, addressing our need for self-transcendence in a public educational setting may be prohibitive—even if we omit something akin to the moksha-medicine of the Palanese. This is because such educational strategies would invariably appear too intrusive into personal lifestyles and subjective matters that are deemed best left to the home. After all, as James Q. Wilson suggests, for the public school to become concerned with such matters would appear to many as an example of the government assuming a tutelary role in our private lives—and the democratic revolution was in large part a rebellion against such governmental tutelage.¹⁸ For this reason, thoughtful parents, receptive to the challenges of advancing a pluralistic identity, would appear to have few options outside of private schools, special charter schools, or home schooling.

NOTES

1. John Dewey, *Democracy And Education* in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953 The Electronic Edition*, MW. 9.93.
 2. Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).
 3. Andrew Newberg and Eugene D’Aquili, *Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).
 4. Aldous Huxley, “Downward Transcendence”, in *Moksha: Aldous Huxley’s Classic Writings on Psychedelics and the Visionary Experience*, Michael Horowitz and Cynthia Palmer, Eds. (Rochester: Park Street Press, 1999), 22-25, 23.
 5. *Ibid.*, 24, 126-27.
 6. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: Norton, 1980), 54.
 7. Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).
 8. Eric H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, second edition (New York: Norton, 1963), 263.
 9. Aldous Huxley, “Culture and the Individual”, in *Moksha*, 252.
 10. Newberg and D’Aquili, *Why God Won’t Go Away*, .87.
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11. Ibid., 19.
 12. Huxley, *Island* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 159.
 13. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).
 14. Ibid., 53.
 15. Newberg and D'Aquili, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 77-97.
 16. Huxley, *Island*, 134.
 17. Aldous Huxley, "The Education of an Amphibian" in *Adonis And The Alphabet: and Other Essays*, 13.
 18. James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 247.
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