

Love, Knowledge and Power

Richard Ostrofsky

October, 2002

One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable, and therefore not popular.

C.J. Jung

If I were called to account for my life – required to justify my interests and pursuits before some Cosmic Inquisition – I would quote this statement of Carl Jung’s. Between them, Aikido, BDSM and political theory have consumed the greatest part of my free time and energy since I was twenty five or thereabouts; and what they have in common is that all three pursuits have their roots in darkness, and specifically in the lust for power. Aikido, a Japanese martial art of great beauty, insight and elegance, is still fundamentally a study of aggression, violence and power. BDSM¹, which I have elsewhere characterized as “*The Way of Whips and Chains*,” is an art and sexual sub-culture concerned with the erotics of pain and shame, power and control, obedience and helplessness. Political theory is about political and economic power, and their transmutation into civilized government. It would be completely dishonest to claim that my interest in these areas has been wholly intellectual or spiritual. The reverse is true: These passions, legacies of my childhood and youth made me the man I became. But I took an intellectual interest in my preoccupations, was far too self-conscious and articulate to leave them unexamined and, in time, was fortunate to discover what I would call a spiritual dimension in each. While each of my pursuits has its roots in darkness and allows some wallowing in darkness for its own sake, each also lends itself to the project Jung describes as enlightenment “by making darkness conscious.” Together they have brought me to a most peculiar “head space”: While I still pursue my passions as such (and have every intention of continuing to do so while my flesh endures), I am more and more interested in what I have come to see as their spiritual dimension, and in exploring what they have in common that have made them passions for me. Since they all seem to point in the same direction, I am seeking a version of spirituality adequate to encompass them and what I think I have learned from them along the way.

I am seeking a version of spirituality – both a practice and an ideal – that is attuned to my own psyche, to this cruel and beautiful world, to our knowledge of it, and to the human condition and heritage, and hope of a future. I want a spiritual ideal and practice that are free of superstition, that suggest ethical choices without prescribing them, that understand the difference between literal truth and metaphor, between *fact*

¹ The name BDSM is a recursive acronym for a whole complex of related sexual interests: in bondage and discipline, in dominance and submission, and in sado-masochism.

and interpretation. If that ideal and practice can serve as the basis for a new religious community – perhaps just a community of two – so much the better. If not, I will just have to go it alone.

The Quakers probably come closer to such an ideal and practice than any group I can think of; yet, ultimately, they fail to satisfy me because they remain committed to what seem to me certain weaknesses, as well as strengths, of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Still, I find their ideal of “responding to that of God in each person” extremely attractive – with two very serious reservations: that I often see more than one God at work, and that the Gods I see are not always good. Somehow, I think we need to respond to the savage Gods as well – not only in others, but in ourselves. I know I do. None the less, I can obtain a degree of spiritual comfort, and an incomplete and imperfect sense of fellowship by attending Quaker worship; and I would subscribe to many aspects of their social activism. I can’t take pacifism quite to the extremes they do, but can certainly agree that violence should be a very last resort, and one we should usually go to any lengths to avoid. I’m not sure where this leaves me. For the time being – quite possibly, for the rest of my life – it leaves me doing a lot of writing to articulate certain thoughts and feelings that find no outlet anywhere else.

As I’ve written elsewhere², it is difficult to speak of things of the spirit without implying belief in supernatural entities. But I don’t believe that Gods are literal beings any more than I believe that thoughts and dreams are material things. Language allows us to imagine and think about many things that have no literal, material existence. Such things are “real” to our imaginations, but not in any other sense.

Similarly, when I speak of the human spirit, I do not have in mind a metaphysical “soul,” that exists independently and survives both the body and its social interactions. Indeed, I explicitly disclaim any such beliefs. But it is still useful to have a word for the aspects of human existence that are not obviously and directly intelligible as functions of the organic, vegetating body, or of the conscious calculating mind. For such aspects, the word spirit with its connotations of breath, energy, passion and emotion is still serviceable to mean “the quality and directedness of a living creature’s vitality.”

As I wrote in the piece just mentioned:

The concept of *spirit* points at that which energizes and directs both mind and body, causing each to reach out (on some terms or other) toward the objects of its interest. Indeed, it is through movements of the spirit (so to speak) that things become interesting. From this perspective, as the so-called “mystics” understood and taught, *spirit* is just another word for *love* in all its forms . . . I take *spirit* to mean the faculty,

² See my essay, *Body, Mind and Spirit*.

possessed by each of us, to allocate attention, interest, love, desire and caring, and to direct intention and volition at their highest levels. The infant's spirit centres in the needs and functions of its own body; and this remains largely true throughout life, for most of us. But, also throughout life, the spirit expands where it can, and contracts when it must. Hardship, remarkably enough, can prompt it either way: Some people seem to become increasingly expansive and noble of spirit—*magnanimous*, in a word—as the result of age and suffering. Think of Beethoven, for an example. Others just get meaner, more bitter, egoistical and encapsulated of spirit, as they grow older. The logic behind the flood, ebb and selective directedness of our spirits—what we choose to love? what we attach ourselves to, and why?—is surely the deepest question of psychology.

Down the ages, numerous thinkers (those inaccurately lumped together as “*mystics*”) have known and taught that love was an instrument of knowledge. To know anything at all you must give attention to it and open yourself to it. This is the wisdom at the core of the world's great religious traditions (only at their very best, alas), and there is nothing at all mystical about it. On the contrary, it is a conclusion available and inevitable to anyone who takes introspection seriously. Aldous Huxley, describes this wisdom as *The Perennial Philosophy*. In fact, the idea that love and knowledge advance together by equal steps has been discovered again and again, in every tradition we know of, by individuals who pray or meditate or philosophize or create works of art — by people who excavate their own consciousness for whatever reason. We start by looking inside ourselves, and we discover that the world we perceive is a selective, interpretive, intensely *personal* fabrication. We do not see things as they are; rather, we make of them what we can and what we like to. Public truth, public policy and the whole social world is a composite and result — a kind of vector sum — of such personal fabrications. Each mind points in its own direction; however, its social contribution to the public result depends upon its “length”: the power at its disposal. Power, cognition and reason are inextricably linked, as Nietzsche and his followers insisted.

The conclusion is that love, knowledge and technology — the way we do things, the way we maintain ourselves and seek to thrive in the world — are inextricably entangled. For love begins with self-love. To begin with, we are interested in our own bodies, and then in the things and people that give us physical satisfaction. From there we may evolve toward more abstract forms of desire, and toward some capacities for friendship and companionship and caring. Finally, we may learn to love not only people and things as they are, but as we conceive that they might be. Each of these developments in our capacities for love will be reflected in capacities for knowledge as well, and then in our capacity to formulate goals, lay plans, and take action. The fortunate today live in wasteful luxury, served by a brutal, exploitative technology in part because our capacity for love has grown no further.

So it is tempting to proclaim that if we could only love one another properly, and love too the Earth, and the creatures of the Earth then its wrongs would be put right and all would be well. This may be so, but it is forlorn as a practical program because what we can love is limited by the attention we can bestow, and by the satisfactions we thereby obtain. Attention is a scarce resource, and love (as the mystics correctly taught) is a generic name for the principles that regulate its investment. It's meaningless to claim to love what we have no time or energy or real desire to pay attention to. Demanding that people love what we think they *should* love, rather than what they actually *do* love merely divides them against themselves (if it has any effect at all), adds to their anxieties or encourages their hypocrisy and, either way, makes them more wretched than before.

With this background understood, I can return to my topic – namely, who I am, and what I am seeking. And I can answer briefly enough: Like everyone else, I am seeking a good life for myself and for those I love. But my capacity to love other people is somewhat stunted and highly selective, and I am seeking to repair and compensate this deficit as best as I can. I am not finding it easy, because my passions are shared by very few people, and my interest in their spiritual dimensions by fewer still. With everyone I meet, I have to decide whether to risk offending them, or keep silent and keep the conversation on the level of banalities. I test the water before I dive in, and usually decide it is wiser to stay out. I can share some of my interests with some my closest friends – and that is about it.

As I said at the beginning, I'm seeking a version of spirituality appropriate to my own perceptions and my own nature. Anyone who wants more detail about this project can get it by talking to me, or by reading what I write. I hope to grow in love and insight – not indiscriminately, but along lines already chosen, commitments already made. If the price is loneliness, so be it.