

Shame on Who?

Raising Shameless, Free, Responsible Young People

by Michael Mendizza

An obscure stat from one of my favorite sources, *Playboy*, noted that 91% of young women and 84% of young men approve of premarital sex. In the 1950's 12% of women and 40% of men held the same belief. The study was published in the *Review of General Psychology*. Wow. That's hot. I thought the sexual revolution was over -apparently not. If, as the headline reads, "All the kids are doing it," responsible sexual development and expression is a BIG concern for today's parents.



Conservatives responded by creating the psychological equivalent of a medieval chastity belt. Girls as young as nine are pledging to their fathers to remain virgins until wed in elaborate ceremonies dubbed Purity Balls. 1400 Balls were held across the US in 2006, mainly in the South and Midwest. Double that number will be held in 2007. The events have all the trappings of a wedding: limousines, proud tuxedo-clad fathers, white cake, an exchange of vows, but no groom and Cinderella is no bride. She's daddy's little girl, taking a vow of chastity until marriage. The public ritual is consummated when dad signs a covenant to protect his daughter's chastity by living an unblemished life. Many offer "purity rings" or "chastity bracelets" to be entrusted to the girl's husband on their wedding night. (Must be a guy thing, controlling the bodies of "their" women and little girls, passing the baton, with the best of intentions of course.)

Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder, or so the saying goes. We can also say, more scientifically, that sensory deprivation, which abstinence implies, produces a hyper-sensitive response to the denied stimulus. Here lies the shadow, a little understood Shakespearian dagger. Developmentally denying sensual (somatosensory) pleasure produces a brain that is hyper sensitive to the denied pleasure when it is experienced. You can see for yourself. Sit in a dark closet for a day and then turn on the light. Fifty watts will blaze like the sun. A brain system normalized to none or very little light will overreact when light is experienced at normal levels. The same is true for affectionate and sexual touch.

We often hear about educating the "whole child." Healthy, biologically normal emergent sexuality requires the integration of sensory, emotional and cortical information by the brain. The development of a fully integrated brain, one that reacts in a balanced way to all its sensory centers, including pleasure, requires that that brain experiences the full spectrum of its potential as it develops. Withholding, limiting, denying normal sensations (sensory deprivation) robs the developing brain of its ability to integrate all of its systems. A sensory deprived brain is not, by definition, a whole brain, which is a prerequisite for a whole child.

Genital sexuality is the natural blossoming of pleasure centers throughout the body. Nature assumes that sensory pleasure, beginning with breast feeding, cuddling, affectionate touch and play is experienced daily throughout the sensitive early stages of brain development, birth to two or three years of age or longer. And that other forms of sensory pleasure, body touch and movement, are the daily-bread of every child's development. And upon this long history of rich sensory experience, the integration of pleasure throughout childhood, the brain is well prepared for the intense flowering of genital sexuality in adolescence. With that the development of powerful physical, emotional and cognitive 'bonding' that integrated pleasure produces. That is what nature designed and expects. Nature assumes full development at every stage. Stage two emerges from and is dependent upon stage one. Millions of years of genetic trial and error have built into our design this 'stage specific unfoldment of potential' including puberty.

What if, just imagine hypothetically, the developing system was deprived normal sensory stimulation of some centers, pleasure for example, prior to reaching this intense predetermined blossoming? Remember sitting in the dark room and then turning on the light? Imagine that this hypersensitivity to normal stimulation were chronic, more or less hard-wired into the developing brain by lack of pleasurable touch and play while the brain was building its basic response patterns it would last a lifetime. How is that brain going to respond to the powerful, primal sensations triggered by pleasure producing hormones flowing to every cell of his or her changing body - integrated and balanced or hyper-sensitive, obsessive, compulsive and addictive?

What if this pleasure deprived, over-reactive condition were to spread throughout the culture by sensory inhibiting beliefs, rituals, myths, ceremonies and punishment? What kind of brain and upon that culture would we produce? One that deals with pleasure and sexuality in a healthy, balanced, biologically integrated way, or a culture that is hyper-sexual, exploitive, ashamed, embarrassed, depressed and even enraged by the conflicts it experiences, living day in and day out with a brain that cannot integrate its own body and mind?

We have two possibilities, and the full continuum in-between: a brain that is nourished with rich sensory experiences from birth forward, one that integrates and therefore understands, with true intelligence, what it experiences with balance and harmony - and a sensory deprived brain, a brain that is constantly at war with itself. Which do you suppose is truly responsible, empathic and intelligent? Which is exploitive, violent and aggressive?

With this question we begin to explore what is required to create a fundamentally new culture beginning with a new generation of shameless, sexually responsible and free young people.

The Betrayal of Intimacy

Pat and I were having coffee. A few nights earlier, Pat, tri-athlete training for the '84 Olympics, returned from the gym, crawled into bed and dozed off. In the other room a man, sack over his head, butcher knife in hand, slipped through a window.

He had stalked her for months. He knew where she worked, where she shopped, her gym schedule, her best friends. Pat recently completed a bicycle ride, Boston to Los Angeles, in record time. She swam twenty-two miles from Catalina Island to the L.A. coastline. She was strong, controlled. It saved her life.

For three hours the masked stalker straddled her, threatened her, beat her. His agenda? Rape, then murder. He placed the knife on the nightstand and began to remove his pants. Pat lunged, throwing her assailant to the floor. She grabbed the knife and chased him from the apartment. Why, I asked? He didn't even know her.

For two and a half years I searched for an answer. Why would a man do such a thing to a woman he didn't know? I visited over 50 rape crisis programs, interviewed district attorneys, prosecutors, victims. Rape, I discovered, is not about sex. What we think of as intimacy with its trust, touch, affection, the feeling of close relationship, and yes, when appropriate, shared sexual pleasure, in this case was being used as a weapon. But why? What is the root, the source of this all too common behavior?

Ask yourself, was this man nurtured, breast fed? Was he cared for, held and affectionately touched as an infant and child? Did he develop a feeling of basic trust relating to others, especially the women close to him, upon which his life depended? Did he play spontaneously and freely? Or was his need for intimacy, feeling safe, being touched and touching others affectionately betrayed? My search led to Dr. William Vicary.

On August 20, 1989 Jose and Kitty Menendez were found murdered by multiple shotgun blasts in their lavish mansion. It took two trials to send their sons to prison for life. Dr. Vicary, a forensic psychiatrist, then head of the USC Sex Offender Program, was the first person in whom Erik Menendez confided about his betrayal of intimacy, the molestations that led to the brutal killings.

My first meeting with William probed why men beat women, rape and abuse children. I left with a stack of books, classic texts on male violence. Two years later I returned to Dr. Vicary's office. He described how everyone, especially boys, need to experience safe, affectionate touch. With rare exception for the men who commit acts of violence against women and children this need for comforting touch was rejected, twisted or betrayed by significant women early in life. He described how this betrayal of intimacy creates a split in the developing psyche. The basic need for intimacy is paired with feelings of rejection. Every time this basic need for intimacy is unfulfilled the feeling of rejection builds. When puberty explodes, so does the feeling of rejection, and with rejection anger and rage.

Boys are more susceptible to this betrayal of intimacy. Ashley Montagu devoted a book to the subject, *The Natural Superiority of Women*. Women carry the future of the species. Biologically they are superior, more resilient, live longer, have higher tolerance for pain, and the connections in their brains are denser. Nature has more trouble with boys. Most spontaneous abortions are male. Infant mortality of males is higher. Boys have more emotional problems. Autism is more prevalent in males than females. Girls mature faster, and on and on.

This increased vulnerability is compounded by cultural beliefs that boys need to be tough. Girls are nurtured. Big boys don't cry. Nature is impersonal. To her, individual sperms and boys are more expendable than girls. When this basic need for nurturing is absent, twisted or betrayed very early in life the effect on the male psyche is often profound. And appreciating this vulnerability of males is a significant factor in our quest, how to raise shameless, and free, sexually responsible young people.

I will be tarred and feathered for the following, but I believe it to be true. If we want to prevent what happened to Pat, male aggression and violence against women and children, we must begin very early by preventing this betrayal of intimacy from lighting the fuse on a biological time-bomb in young boys. The prevention of rape and violence against women and children begins very early by encoding the brain with sensual experiences that lead to basic trust, feeling wanted, being breast fed, carried, affectionately touched and comforted rather than punished when a break in the bond occurs. In a word – nurtured, which is primarily communicated physically as the developing brain lays down its tracks early in life. Later stages of development rest upon the foundations set very early.

We often miss this link between early foundations and current behavior. I am reminded of a story about Albert Einstein. He was asked by a reporter, "Sir, we are in a cold war. How can we produce the best scientists in the world?" "Tell them fairy tales as children," was the reply. "No, sir, you don't understand," said the reporter. "We need the very best scientists." "Then tell them more fairy tales," said Einstein. The same is true for adult sexuality. Puberty blossoms in the physical-sensory (somatosensory) soil ploughed years earlier. Prepare that soil by breast feeding for two years or longer. (Inferior nutrition aside, plastic bottles are sensory deprivation compared to the warmth, touch, sight, fragrance, hormones and shared pleasure experienced at mother's breast.) The experience of being nurtured, held, carried and playfully touched provides the template for later intimate encounters.

It was Harry Harlow who did the famous sensory deprivation experiments in the late 1950's. Harlow separated baby monkeys from their mothers at birth, raising them in isolation cages where they could see, hear and smell other monkeys, but not touch or be touched by them. Shortly after meeting Dr. Vicary I chanced upon the works of James W. Prescott, PhD, a brain researcher who specialized in the impact sensory deprivation has on the developing brain. One of the more disturbing pathologies Jim studied was the inability of female monkeys raised in isolation to be touched, to groom, mate or care for their young. Lack of normal mothering as an infant, being touched, breastfed and carried, prevented the development of social and empathic skills upon which later sexual behavior and mothering depended. The human brain is much more complex than other primates. The physical, emotional, social and sexual brain systems however, are very similar. We described above the impact a betrayal of intimacy (and its implicit sensory deprivation) has on boys. Lack of mothering as an infant and child has a direct and powerful impact on how today's young mothers relate to and care for their babies.

The Bonded and Unbonded Brain

A great deal has been written about girls and young women 'hooking-up' a term used to describe the common trend to connect sexually, briefly, without any emotional bonding or attachment. When asked, young women often say they are too busy with personal pursuits, getting good grades, for example, to be bothered by 'relationships'. It is not the sexual stimulation found in this trend that is disturbing. It is the lack of affection, empathy, what we call bonding that is most troubling. Imagine the impact this lack of connection, care, affection and empathic bonding might have on a newborn.

Pleasure is addictive, pleasure bonds, and upon these addictive 'bonding' qualities of pleasure survival of the species depends. What if we sever or betray the higher bonding nature of pleasure and leave only the lower sensory-motor-self-centered addiction? Mating (pair bonding), mothering, nurturing are removed leaving only sensory-motor stimulation. How does this change the way the brain develops and from that the kind of mothers, fathers, society and culture we create?

When we depersonalize sexuality and view it as part of a larger system, the role that pleasure plays in bonding and the preservation of the species becomes clearer. Though not black and white we see the emergence of two different brains - one bonded. the other not. The bonded brain integrates, which is reflected in a corresponding relationship based 'with-the-world self-image' created by this brain. The unbonded brain integrates less. It tends to disassociate, fragment and create a separate, defensive, isolated 'against-the-world self-image' and view of the world.

It is easy to see that emergent sexuality will look and feel very differently depending on which of these two brains the sensual flower is blooming. The key to developing a nonviolent, cooperative, egalitarian, shameless, free and sexually responsible society and world is in nurturing the soil for such a self-world view very early, as the developing brain is building the switch-board it will use for a lifetime. Imposing moral judgments, rewards and punishments during and after puberty is a joke. The tipping point is not how to cover or deodorize the flower. What determines how that flower is experienced, understood, expressed and shared is the deeper brain and body structure, bonded or unbonded, from which that flower is emerging. The nurturing of this early brain is done primarily through direct physical and emotional experience; touch, movement, and play - not through intellectual, moral, and religious instruction.

Sexuality is like a flower blossoming in a sensory system that has been growing since conception. The flower is part of a larger system. What we think of as our individuality is a reflection of a much larger system, our autobiographical and genetic memory (mom, dad and their surrounding environment-culture, their mom and dad and surrounding environment-culture, their mom and dad and surrounding culture trailing back to the dawn of time and beyond). To this we must include the experiences we have with non material, non local fields, timeless waves of meaning constantly washing over and through us, what some refer to as insights, Eureka's, or even past lives. All of this provides the background or context that gives the foreground, our individual flowering, meaning. From this transpersonal perspective we discover that we are not isolated individuals. That is an image, an illusion.

The illusion is created by the brain. From this ever changing stream of background influences our brain abstracts still images. When strung together like frames of animation cells appear to us and others as an independent individual or self. The same brain projects onto this self-image timeless non-material qualities we call soul, which is, in reality, just another image. (The brain can create an image of the timeless but that image itself is not timeless.) The images we have about ourselves as individuals operate the same way. Our self image is a mental construct. The illusion of continuity is generated the same way persistence of vision animates Disney cartoons. The image of self is created by the reflection we experience being accepted or rejected in the mirror of relationship, personal and cultural.

When we are truly at peace, belong, feel completely safe, there is nothing to justify or defend. Foreground melts into background. In that moment or state there is no image, no fragmentation in consciousness, no independent self or other. Awareness, attention and true intelligence are freed from the blinders imposed by cultural conditioning and expectations. Krishnamurti referred to this state as 'choiceless awareness,' choice in this sense being a form of cultural conditioning that binds or constrains the free movement of true intelligence.

Responsibility – Cultural and Much Deeper

From this larger perspective shame and embarrassment are seen for what they are, powerful tools used to modify, condition, bind and control individual behavior to fit cultural norms. From this we see the emergence of two types of responsibility, one cultural and the other much deeper, dare I say intelligent.

To most being responsible is cultural. Culturally being responsible means being a person who respects, upholds and conforms to the right and wrong codes of the group, be it the race, tribe, village, state, nation, religion or gang. They all abide by the same rules of inclusion, by morphing individual identity with that of the group. I am a Catholic. I am a Republican. I am a Muslim. With each one's sense of self, the 'I', and the larger group or culture, are fused. A challenge to the group identity, belief or behavior is experienced as an assault on one's deepest sense of self. And we will kill anyone who does so, and we have for centuries.

There is another form of responsibility, one much deeper than culture. From this deeper feeling of being responsible, cultural responsibility often appears irresponsible. The Dalai Lama referred to this deeper feeling of responsibility when he distinguished religion from spirituality. He observed that religion is a cultural artifact. Spirituality is developmental. He went on to say that we could live without the rules and regulations imposed by religion but not without the spiritual development of kindness, affection, and compassion.

"There is an important distinction to be made between religion and spirituality. Religion I take to be concerned with faith in the claims to salvation of one faith tradition or another, an aspect of which is acceptance of some form of metaphysical or supernatural reality, including perhaps an idea of heaven or nirvana. Connected with this are religious teachings or dogma, ritual, prayer, and so on."

“Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit--such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony--which bring happiness to both self and others. While ritual and prayer, along with the questions of nirvana and salvation, are directly connected to religious faith, these inner qualities need not be, however. There is thus no reason why the individual should not develop them, even to a high degree, without recourse to any religious or metaphysical belief system. This is why I sometimes say that religion is something we can perhaps do without. What we cannot do without are these basic spiritual qualities.” (p.22)

“These may seem unusual statements, coming as they do from a religious figure. I am, however, Tibetan before I am Dalai Lama, and I am human before I am Tibetan. So while as Dalai Lama I have a special responsibility to Tibetans, and as a monk I have a special responsibility toward furthering interreligious harmony, as a human being I have a much larger responsibility toward the whole human family--which indeed we all have.” (p.20)

The Dalai Lama
Ethics for a New Millennium

When we shed our identity as a cultural individual, be it a team, gang, nation, race or religion, identity expands, transcends the limitations and constraints imposed by these categories. When we shed our identity as a human being our sense of self expands again to include all of nature. Animals, trees, grasses, the sky and sea become our family. This, I believe, is what Krishnamurti meant when he said, ‘You are the world’. He meant it not as an idea but as an absolute, irrefutable, truth, an experienced reality. And from this deeper perspective being responsible looks and feels very differently than being a good girl or a good Democrat.

This deeper feeling of responsibility emerges naturally when we free ourselves from the weight and boundaries imposed by cultural conditioning and the false images this conditioning implies. Shame and embarrassment are part of the weight. Shameless, free and responsible, sexually and in all other aspects of our life, begins when we deepen and expand our identity to include all of nature, which means everything, one song, the universe.

I realize this sounds romantic, idealistic. Rarely in our obsessive, self absorbed world do we experience gaps in limited categories we have accepted about ourselves and impose on others, especially our children, gaps that Joseph Chilton Perce referred to in his first book, “Crack in the Cosmic Egg.” However, it is only gazing through the cracks that we see beyond the narrow egg that confines and defines so much of our experience. Our challenge is to discover a deeper transpersonal view and corresponding responsibility in ourselves and model it for our children while chopping wood and carrying water. In this deeper awareness and feeling of shameless responsibility sexual pleasure takes its natural place in the ‘Tao’ of our lives.

Freedom and Responsibility

Remember being three or maybe five years old, running through the sprinklers on a hot summer day, naked and free. Can you do that today? Where did that freedom go, not necessarily the freedom to do whatever you want, but the freedom to enter the next moment without a trace of embarrassment, shame or guilt? What is embarrassment? What purpose does it serve? Who benefits from embarrassment and guilt, the controller or the controlled? Is shame and embarrassment empowering or crippling? If crippling, and I believe it is, why would we do this to each other and especially to our children, and so often, with such vengeance? Shame on you! Can we guide children into adulthood so they blossom into fully embodied, present, sensual, responsible and passionate men and women without crippling them along the way? That is our quest.

Shame and the Origin of Self

True responsibility abides in freedom, not conformity as many believe. To be free, deeply responsible, one must be shameless - without shame. Shame means disgrace, dishonor, that our acceptance by the group, tribe, village, church, club, gang is threatened, broken or rejected. Shame is the primary behavior modification strategy used by culture, including parents, to insure that members adhere to strict norms. We do it this way, not that way. We can tell by the way she moves, dresses, the color of her skin, that she is part of our group, an insider. He is not. You can tell by the way he looks, how he speaks. We sing these songs, not those. We bow our heads this way, not that way. Acceptance by the group is assured by paying allegiance, conforming to rules. Break the rules and our position is threatened. Deep inside this feels like embarrassment, rejection, disgrace, shame.

Adults disapprove of children's behavior eleven times to each positive encouragement. The pattern, even to a toddler, is painfully obvious. Children learn very quickly to anticipate disapproval. Like a grain of sand irritating an oyster this defensive reflex, with its associated feelings of embarrassment, rejection or shame, becomes a habit. Every time we reach for something new, try something different, read out loud, step up to bat, ask a boy or girl to dance, there it is – that old-defensive feeling.

This conditioning runs deep and begins early with smiles of approval and frowns of disapproval. Yes, approval conditions and controls just as much as punishments. Visit Alfie Kohen's remarkable work, *Punished by Rewards*, and you will see. According to Alan Schore, MD, author of *Affect Regulation and the Origins of Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development*, the creation of our image of self begins most strongly between twelve and eighteen months, when we leave the safety of mother's arms and become mobile. Increased mobility brings greater risk. Strangely mom, dad and caregivers respond by saying "No." Most often we ignore their prohibitions. They, in turn, respond by turning up the juice. NO! they scream. Every nine minutes, research tells us, toddlers are threatened with NO! and DON'T and each splits the child's attention forcing a defensive response.

Each new exploration seems to transform loving caregivers into screaming maniacs. The pattern is repeated so often that children soon develop a preemptive defensive reflex.

Like Pavlov and his dog, just the thought of trying something new rings an inner bell triggering a defensive response along with a corresponding loss of real development and learning. The child learns to self regulate, that is, limit their development, by conforming to predetermined patterns, which, for many, never stops.

Schore states; "Mother utilizes facially expressed stress-inducing shame transactions which engender a psychobiological missatunement with the mother." Her look warns the child that the action he or she is taking or is about to take will break the bond. That is a threat and this becomes a permanent imprint.

Driven by nature to explore the world, the child is threatened if he or she does by their caregiver—with whom he or she is equally driven to maintain the bond. The resulting conflict sets up the first major wedge in the infant's mind. The toddler and young child will maintain what integrity they can, but eventually will split and become one of us. We then speak of the emergence of the child's "social self," by which we mean he or she has adopted the enculturated mask we adults have learned to wear. They create an image of themselves in the mirror they see reflected by others. Soon the image replaces their true identity and they forget who they really are.

This preemptive defensive reflex, now a familiar habit, creates a disturbance in the child's developing body and brain. Like a nagging thorn the disturbance stimulates the brain to create an inner image of the familiar pattern, an image we learn to call our 'self'. And because children are threatened so often this image feels normal, real and permanent.

Consider the possibility that the image we create, believe is permanent, of supreme importance, justify and defend, is just an image. What does that say about our self? Which comes first—the self, the image or the feeling? Most would say the self. Perhaps we have it backward. Maybe feelings of embarrassment, threat, rejection and shame come first and from that we create the image.

Now You See It – Now You Don't

Of course, you say, everyone has a self. It is defined by our body. Clearly I am different from the tree or a rock. Look again, more closely. The body is made-up of trillions of interdependent cells and each is defined by its body. Which one is the real me? If a cell dies, and millions do each day, is my 'self' any less? A report recently revealed that as much as 40% of the cells we call me aren't even ours. They are bacteria, yeast and millions of other buggers hitching a ride. Should we consider all these parasites part of ourselves? Yuck.

David Bohm, the bridge scientist between Einstein's generation and our current crop of theoretical physicists, described how the boundaries we think of as solid, our skin and bones, for example, aren't. The closer we look, all matter, including the matter we call ourselves, begins to break apart. Zoom in closer and giant gaps appear in all directions. Edges get fuzzy and soon dissolve into nothing (not a thing). Now you see me. Now you don't.

OK – so the body doesn't define the self. What about the energy that makes up the body? That too gets pretty dicey. Energy, according to Einstein, doesn't operate according to the same laws as the so called 'physical universe'.

The vast majority of energy in the universe (the one song) is non-local. In simple terms this means that it is everywhere at the same time, except, in the quantum universe, time doesn't exist. Where is the self now? Everywhere, all at once, beyond time and beyond space. Try to catch that in a paper bag.

The image is so convincing. It must be real, tangible, a separate independent entity, captain of our ship, the one experiencing the embarrassing feeling. Alexandra David Neil, author of *The Secret Oral Teaching in Tibetan Buddhists Sects*, describes in great detail how masters of the inner world contend that experience comes first, then the image which we falsely personify as an independent entity. Pull back the curtain and the all-mighty and powerful OZ (our self image) is not what we believe it to be. The wizard is an image created by the brain because that's what brains do. Among a million or so other things, brains create images of sensory, emotional and imaginative experience. Again, like a grain of sand, the disturbance of not feeling accepted, not belonging, embarrassment and shame are experiences and the brain creates images we call 'our self' to comprehend and catalog these experiences.

The self must be real and permanent. Every time we look at ourselves, there we are. What we miss are the rare moments when we aren't looking. With complete attention, a hallmark of optimum states of learning and performance, complete attention is invested in meeting the challenge of the moment. Complete means 100%. This means no attention left over to evaluate how we are doing while we are doing. Complete attention means total engagement and no me. Krishnamurti put it this way: "With complete attention there is no observer."

We are not talking about each individual's expression of creative potential. No one is quite like us, at least not yet. (Human cloning is not far off. Imagine how that is going to shake up the meaning of self.) Yes, we are all unique snowflakes floating ever so briefly in the churning stew called humanity. Frankly, we are ever so much the same. Much more so than the minute differences some of us express. Snowflakes, however, don't make up psychological images, names, get insulted, feel hurt, defensive if another doesn't like their crystals. Snowflakes don't make up philosophies, ideologies, invent racism, conflicting religions, witch hunts, national boundaries, and strike out at others who don't share the same fantasy. All this is inseparably linked to the same image making process that gives rise to the illusion we call 'me'.

Don't be nervous. We are simply questioning our unquestioned belief in a psychological image. Where did it come from? What purpose does it serve? The image is a cultural construct designed to control us, limit and constrain our development. That is the hidden, true function of the image. Culture needs deep hooks to keep us from flying.

Who Needs A Self Anyway?

When has your self (the image that feels embarrassed) helped you ski, dance, sing, speak, hit the ball, paint, take a test, ride a bike, make love and a million other things? Could the self-image we protect and cherish be nothing more than a ghost, a brain-fart, or as Charles Dickens described, “the manifestation of an undigested bit of potato,” an imaginary ball and chain that has shackled humanity for thousands of years, keeping most everyone repeating the same dumb things generation after generation?

What if the image we call our self is only there when we look, when we feel threatened, a habit we learned as children? The self-image might be self generative. Looking creates the image. Maybe, just maybe, looking at ourselves creates an illusion that there is something to look at. Behind the illusion is a familiar disturbance, a preemptive defensive reflex.

But we really need a self to know how we are doing. Don't we? The body has an instant feedback system called proprioception. Move your hand behind your back and you know exactly where it is. You don't need a self-image to learn and grow. Hit the ball. Watch it fly. You know if it goes straight or lands in the pond. This is direct, honest, accurate feedback. Feeling embarrassed about miffing the shot is different. Embarrassed looking is different from just looking. Embarrassed looking is defensive. It produces a disturbance in the body causing the brain to generate an image. And we are all enchanted by it. We are convinced, like the king's new clothes, that we are the image. But what we call 'me' is just an image, a metaphor, something that represents something else, a grain of sand under our skin.

Making matters worse, much worse, is the fact that being an image our self-world view absorbs and takes on the appearance of other images, most often the images formed from the customs and beliefs that define our group, tribe, nation, religion, gang, political party. I am a republican. I am a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, Asian, Black, a Native, a pitcher for the Mets, a baker or candle stick maker. Each of these categories is defined by a system of beliefs. Beliefs are mental images. Belonging to the group demands that we abide by, believe in and incorporate these group images into our personal self-image. That is what belonging to a culture means.

On critical examination we find that the image we feel so embarrassed about isn't really ours. The image is cultural and all cultural images operate more or less the same. That is why group images, be it a gang or corporate identity, morph so easily into our personal self-image. One can hardly tell the difference because there is none. Our brain could care less what image it holds. Images are images. They are all the same as Charles Schultz, author of Peanuts, put simply. “It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.” And we do it so naturally. It feels safe inside the circle and so scary outside. The greater the fear the more narrow, conservative, fundamental our self-world view becomes.

Less is More

When threatened, rather than defending the image, which has been our defensive reflex, personally, nationally, religiously and culturally for centuries, there is another possibility. Be more inclusive. Expand your self-world view. This happens naturally, simply when we peel away the limited and often false images we have accepted about ourselves and project onto others. Online dating services are doing it. Check the box. "I am spiritual but not religious." My self-image and with it my potential spirituality expands when I am no longer a Hindu, a Christian or a Jew. The group to which I then belong, all of humanity, expands tremendously.

The next challenge is to drop the image that I am a human being. Bang. Who I am expands again. Birds, bears, sea lions, chickens and whales suddenly become brothers and sisters. Not as a sentimental idea, a romantic wish, rather, as a direct, immediate, tangible, practical reality, one new-agers might call mystical.

Less is more. We expand when we free ourselves from the cultural categories that bind us. Drop the limited image and the next image expands. This, I believe, is nature's plan, her agenda, to connect, bond with and literally become ever larger and more inclusive by shedding, like a molting snake, limiting beliefs and images. With each shedding we become larger, until finally there is no image at all as we pour over the horizon embodying everything.

This rant about self image isn't theoretical. It is the most important, most practical step we can take. How can we raise shameless, free and responsible young people if we first blind them with stupid images? The energy and attention mistakenly invested in the defense and maintenance of self images, tribalism, nationalism, religious conflicts, gangs, wars, personal, corporate and global comparison and competition is the very energy needed to solve the challenges that threaten life on our big blue marble.

Understanding that images are images gives new meaning to unconditional love. Real love is never conditional. Giving love in return for tribal allegiance is manipulative. Love is love, not something to dangle on a string like a carrot.

Unconditional love eliminates the threat and with that the need for defensive images disappears. Can you love unconditionally? You can't if you have an image that demands justifying, comparing and defending. Imagine being a child and looking in the mirror of a mother, father or caregiver that loves unconditionally. What freedom that would bring. In that freedom, when the conditioned image disappears, real intelligence begins. Only then can the energy and attention used to sustain the image be playfully invested in learning and performance. Freeing ourselves from the ghost images that haunt us is the first step. How? By putting an end to feeling embarrassed about anything. Banish shame from your life now and for evermore. Experience and model the responsibility that true freedom brings.

It takes energy, attention and creative intelligence to navigate today's ultra complex world. For tens of thousands of years this creative energy with its limitless potential has been sucked into false images at the expense of real learning, growth and true human development. Free yourself from these images and you free the children who are looking to you for guidance. Can't you hear them? "You are our only hope," Obi-Wan Kenobi. This is the moment. It is our turn at bat.

"There is no self, only thought that creates the self.

Krishnamurti

Pleasure and Pleasure's Shadow

When threatened, in any way, real or imagined, the self-image is there, defending. When we feel safe, a deep sense of belonging, bonded, related and engaged, the self-image is not there. Basic trust or its absence, chronic feelings of separation and defense, etch deeply into the neural patterns that shape perception and our interpretation of daily events. Adapting an ancient metaphor, two blind men are touching the elephant, one with an unbonded brain, the other with a bonded brain. Identical contacts with the outer world produce completely different images within these two brains. The meaning of every experience, lifelong, is mediated by the presence or absence of this self-image producing fear-control reflex.

John wrote a book on corporate selling. In the first chapter he defined three requirements for making any sale: approval of others, approval of self and safety. At least two of the three were needed to close any deal. John was the son of an East Coast politician, a high level corporate sales executive and trainer. He was a friend of the family and for a decade attended major events, birthdays and Christmas. He discovered and promoted a fraudulent scheme, was convicted of conspiracy and spent a year in federal prison. I visited him twice at his white collar detention center where he spent most of his time brushing up on corporate law.

Shortly after he was released, still on probation, he asked that I design and print expensive gold embossed stationery to impress a new client, which I did and delivered one day later than expected, not unusual in the printing business. John refused to pay the bill. Later I discovered that he needed only one sheet to meet his need. Why pay for 1,000 sheets when all you need is one? John never intended to pay the bill.

How could he do such a thing, being a close friend of the family? John laughed. "Only a sap would not," he said. Two colleagues and I filed small claims to recover our \$1,500 losses. John filed a \$1 million dollar counter claim which elevated the issue to superior court. The cost to fight John's false accusations was more than twice that of our small claim and he knew it.

This strategy put John in the center of attention for several months, which, to him, was the same as having the approval of others. Unbonded, John could care less if you approved of him or not. To his brain attention is the same as approval. John loved being able to cheat another, anybody, it didn't matter. He felt an inner feeling of accomplishment, even pride doing so. Cheating another met his criteria for self approval. And security? I posed no threat. He already had two out of three.

John won and I learned a great lesson. Mom had a cartoon over her desk. "Never fight with a pig," it says. "You both get dirty and the pig loves it."

The opening of John's book described the hallmark of what I call the unbonded brain: approval of others, self approval and safety. Behind this often lies a ruthlessness few seem to recognize. Indeed, to the unbonded brain these are the only reasons to do anything. This is the only brain John has. He took pride being ruthless. Those not as ruthless as he, nurturing or altruistic, were saps, weak, whining, sentimental wimps who use emotions to win what they really need, approval and safety.

Masters of the inner game, Tibetan monks for example, study ancient Buddhist texts. One describes the importance of virtues, kindness, generosity, charity, service and others. The ancient text lists the same virtues in two columns; one is normal virtues, the other lists golden virtues. Both lists are identical. The difference is the motivation of the practitioner. Normal virtues are practiced because they enhance one's self esteem or image. John comes to mind and his ruthless need for self-approval, approval of others and safety. Golden virtues are practiced for their own sake. Charity, kindness, and generosity are acts that contribute to the larger social web of which we are a part. No one practices golden virtues. There is no doer, only relationship.

It has been said that there are many paths to enlightenment, that mystical, completely integrated, related, bonded state. At the heart of each path or method is a penetrating insight that dissolves the false images we cling to and defend, about ourselves and others. Basic trust developed through affectionate touch and play very early in life smoothes the road to enlightenment. The opposite, lack of basic trust, anxiety, fear and control make the journey extremely difficult, perilous and for some impossible.

The dangers of rewards and punishments come to mind. Desire for external rewards and fear of punishments fragment attention. One's center shifts from inner-intrinsic to outer-extrinsic motivations, from having no self-image, for there is no failure possible in real play and real learning, to an ever-present and demanding image. Having no image means that there is nothing to justify or defend. Rewards and punishments reinforce, strengthen and gain power over our behavior by stimulating the fear-control reflex which we experience as a self-image. If there is no self-image there would be nothing for the reward or the implied threat to stick to. It is the self-image, our need for approval of others, approval of self and safety that give rewards and punishments their power.

The Fear-Control Reflex

In *Fahrenheit 911* Michael Moore described how crime statistics have lowered over the past decade and how, counter-intuitively, sensational reporting of crime and terror have increased. People seem to believe what they see on television, not what they experience directly, which is very strange indeed, resulting in the general perception that crime is on the rise. The reflex-response to fear is control.

Fear has been used politically by this and past administrations to control behavior. Increase fear and control becomes rather simple. In a remarkable new book, *In Defense of Childhood*, Chris Mercogliano details a similar trend regarding childhood.

Throughout the last century the general safety and wellbeing of most children have steadily increased. Curiously, during the same century, the perception of children as strong, resilient, capable and self directed has been replaced with a pervasive view that children are weak, psychologically and emotionally vulnerable, in constant danger of lurking predators, will poke their eyes out and fall off swings if not hovered over, organized and protected by anxious, well-meaning adults.

Adult fear results in childhood control. Chris explores diverse causes for increased adult fears, falling birth rates for example. One child breaking out of six elicits a different response from parents than if this is my only child. Psychology came of age in the late 40's and 50's and with it the 'inner child' emerged. Suddenly misbehavior by adults might leave lasting psychological wounds. Television and Little League changed fundamentally how children played. The Halloween candy scare of the 70's, which turned out to be completely false, altered this uniquely child-centered celebration forever. At each step the 'wildness of childhood,' as Chris describes it, was sucked out, limited and constrained by well-meaning fear driven adults. Between 1980 and 1990 what remained of the unstructured 'free-play' of childhood collapsed 40%.

It is the unstructured time, the free-play time, the time away from hovering adults, free from external rewards and punishments, the time off from psychological comparison and fear that is free from the crippling effects of self-images. The adult organized time, the comparative, competitive, win-lose time, which includes virtually all of what we call schooling, after school and sport activities engage the fear-control-image reflex, etching its way in the developing brain and psyche. The deeper the conditioning the stronger the reflex, the more difficult it is to regain the natural order of the body and mind with its optimum learning as most performance specialists can attest.

Prohibition, Pleasure, and Crazy Behavior

Let's generalize and look briefly how this fear-control-image reflex is used to control by manipulating one of the most fundamental human drives, the quest for pleasure and avoidance of pain.

Why are girls or women who enjoy sensual pleasure called sluts? Does masturbation really cause us to go blind? Why is being a virgin so highly valued in our Judaic-Christian culture, the roots of which include Islam? In many Islamic regions when a sister or daughter is shamed sexually the brother or uncle who puts a pistol to her head is treated as a hero. By any measure these 'honor killings' are an extreme form of control, one that makes Christian Purity Balls appear benign by comparison. Both reveal a general pattern, the control of pleasure, especially female, by male dominated beliefs, rituals and institutions.

For centuries institutions have controlled behavior by limiting pleasure. Who benefits from this control? What power would politicians, the church, mob, or even parents have (strange bed-fellows indeed) if children grew shamelessly free, free meaning without psychological fear, guilt, shame and the images these feelings induce? Would we breed a race of hedonists, addicts, predators and child molesters, consuming each other in a perennial *Lord of the Flies* frenzy?

As we explored earlier, brain studies of touch deprived monkeys reveal their hypersensitivity to touch. A touch deprived brain (and culture) is hypersensitive (obsessively, compulsively over-reactive) to the deprived stimulation. Are we a touch deprived, pleasure deprived culture? If so, how long has this sensory deprivation been going on? A few months? Years? Centuries? What impact does pleasure deprivation have on the developing brain and the culture that brain produces?

The Greeks and most likely earlier philosophers believed that the spirit that animates is more godlike than physical matter. Extending this belief the mind, thought, will, was considered more pure, holier than the body, which was something to overcome, vile, dirty, even satanic. Emerging in a patriarchal milieu spirit which included mental activity was considered male. Physical processes, especially pleasure, were female. The body therefore was a breeding ground of sin and evil and female sexuality was transformed from a pagan goddess to an unholy force that lures men and the male spiritual principle off course. It wasn't the integration of mind and body but a mind-body split that opens heavens gates.

In such a world chastity (sensory deprivation) is virtuous. Lose women, those who enjoy sensual pleasure are gluttonous sluts. Fast forward several thousand years, look under the covers and you will find the same myth, morphing in many forms, lurking in the cultural psyche. (It is strange, don't you think, how difficult it is to find a comparable term for males who enjoy sensual pleasure.)

Keep your hands to yourself

This mind-body split has caused many researchers to conclude that much of Western civilization suffers from a pervasive pattern of pleasure deprivation.

See: <http://www.tffuture.org/services/bonding/publications.htm>).

Pleasure deprivation — what a strange sounding phrase. Are we touch deprived? American women rarely breast feed babies for more than a few months. Bottle feeding is sensory deprivation compared to intimate human contact. Sensory deprivation at the most sensitive periods of brain development changes how the brain grows. By age six the average American child has spent twelve (twenty-four hour) months watching electronic media. As loud and obnoxious as most media is, the sensory experience is still deprivation. Inactivity, obesity, diabetes come as a package. Ice cream and candy abound. Are these the only sensual pleasures we allow? What about touch? When is the comfort and pleasure of a hug replaced by “keep your hands to yourself?” When hormones begin to flow, should that young person be touched more or less, in what way and by whom?

Yes, uncle Charlie is a pervert and we all have an uncle Charlie or suspect one. How did that perversion emerge? Was he held as a child, breast fed, touched and played with affectionately? Or was he deprived of normal mothering, denied free-play, over controlled, organized, judged, shamed and therefore prevented from integrating the normal experience of selfless pleasure in his developing body and brain?

Too much pleasure, like anything else, is boring. Few, however, seem to suffer from this malady. Denied pleasure becomes explosive when the match of pleasure is struck. Puberty fuels this fire. Is the solution to further reduce pleasure through increased punishments, more deprivation, shame and guilt, or by embracing pleasure as one would vitamin b, c and d?

If you wanted to maintain and control an obsessive, aggressive, consuming population which would be more effective — transform pleasure into a reward by depriving it, then employ shame when it rears its ugly head, or ensure that pleasure was normal, easily accessible and abundant? One nail drives out another. Affectionate pleasure displaces aggressive violence. The denial of pleasure breeds violence. Which path did our forefathers take?

*From the woman came the beginning of sin, and by her we all die.
Ecclesiastics (25:33)*

Has this led to healthy, fully embodied, peaceful, egalitarian society or self-centered, disembodied and violent cultures? More of the same or shall we take a different path?

Pleasure is naturally addictive

Nature isn't stupid. The most sensitive, pleasure generating, tissues of the body surround the thresholds of reproduction. Ever notice how the petals of a flower surround the stamen? Strip away moralistic myth and dogma. We are designed to seek experiences that produce pleasure and run away from those that don't. Pleasure is a natural reward. Punishment is pleasure's shadow.

Sex, of course, is pleasurable and thus a powerful reward. The experience of pleasure produces hormones (oxytocin, dopamine and others) which flood the body with euphoric (opiate) effects. The experience of falling in love — mother with infant, boys and girls, husbands and wives, (guys with their jet skis? well-maybe) is accompanied by the release of these natural opiates, sexual orgasm and childbirth being the two most intense injections of "love hormones." Love, in this simplistic model, is the transcendent integration of sensory pleasure and euphoric feelings. All of this, the experience of pleasure and bonded attachment (attachment being a natural form of addiction to the source of pleasure) comes as a package. And this package predates the neocortex, "intellectual thought" by millions of years.

Perhaps 50,000 years ago, give or take, there appeared a new brain system, the neocortex with its remarkable capacity to perceive patterns, predict, symbolize and control. This cortex does not feel pleasure or emotions. It simply notes their occurrence, along with statistical data regarding time, place, and source, and a relative pleasure-pain score — on a scale of 1 to 10, do we want to repeat this experience or run away from it. With repeated stimulation this miraculous calculator begins to predict and anticipate associative probabilities.

Being close to her produced pleasure, which is noted and paired by the intellect to the euphoric emotional state we call love. If I come close to her again, calculates the intellect, odds are favorable that pleasure and its euphoria will repeat. The churning of these calculations produces mental images.

Images of anticipated pleasure send signals to the emotional and sensory regions of the brain, which respond as if the thought-forms were “real.” Mental facsimiles trigger the release of “love” hormones, similar to Pavlov’s dog salivating when the bell rings, the bell, in this case, being “thought.”

With the emergence of anticipated pleasure comes a cascade of shadows — possession, greed, jealousy, suspicion, anger, revenge, rage, all triggered by the cortex seducing the body and emotions in the pursuit of pleasure. “Thought” wanting pleasure to repeat begins calculating ways to possess and control the source of pleasure. This inner process expresses outwardly as culture, social systems that mimic the same attributes of prediction and control, governments, moral laws, organized religions, police and prisons.

These cortical processes become self-generative, obsessively reproducing similar patterns, dictating how the sensory-motor and limbic (emotional) systems should and should not behave. To check this natural addiction cortical commandments must be carved in stone. Thou shall and shall not. The same disembodied cortex then discovered that profits can be made by controlling pleasure. Sex sells. Pleasure became big business.

It is the intellect that transforms pleasure into a social, economic and political commodity. Prohibit pleasure and the price we are willing to pay goes up. Control the market and you control the population. Institutions invested in crowd control, politicians, marketers, church, gangsters, and don’t forget parents, all profit from controlling pleasure.

What if sensual pleasure was as plentiful as Starbucks? How would that affect the market? It is OK to drink yourself silly but not to smoke pot. Is this rational? Which is more harmful? Alcohol, clearly! Natives ingested plants to induce pleasure. Domesticated farmers ingested grain alcohol. Had the natives been political pot would be legal and million white drunks might be in prison.

If pleasure were freely available, shared openly, shamelessly, if our sensory systems, bodies, minds and psyches were bathed in pleasurable sensations from conception through old age, how would this affect the world we live in? Would the pursuit of pleasure dominate us as it now does?

Freedom - who are we kidding?

Is it really a good idea to raise shameless, free and responsible young people? One has to wonder. Perhaps it’s crazy. Shame is one of the most powerful tools in our adult arsenal. Responsible – indeed responsible to do what one is told, to follow the lead, anticipate expectations and act accordingly. That, to most, is being responsible. And freedom? What an outlandish notion. We are not free and we really don’t want our children to be. Children are cultural creations marching to a very conservative drum, conservative in the sense of mimicking traditions, not stepping too much to the left or the right, rather moving predictably down a well worn path.

Even the rebelliousness of the young is culturally predicated and controlled. Let them wear baggy pants (remember Zoot suiters?), pierce their ears, noses, tongues, bellies, and other private parts, believing they are free. Keep them busy with such nonsense and of course they will never be truly free, which is, after all, the goal. Church, school, government and most parents don't want young people to be free, shameless. Not at all! Strip away the moral praise and blame and we find that these institutions are behavior modification machines, grinding out the same old model, generation after generation.

Joseph Chilton Pearce shakes his head praising what has been called exemplars of the 'break-away' tradition - Socrates, Jesus, Buddha and others, astonished that nearly all ignore the model these rare human beings represent. For millennia real individuals have demonstrated capacities far above the cultural norm, what we, barbecuing in the suburbs, call miracles. 'Greater things shall ye do if you had the clarity of a mustard seed,' meaning, if we knew who we are.

We don't know ourselves - not at all. We are presented very early with a cultural image, what good boys and girls say and do. Step out of that box and wham! "Go to your room, young man;" or worse still, "take this little pill, darling, it will help you concentrate." How can we 'know ourselves' locked in our room or drugged out of our minds? "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind" does not mean Prozac or shame for not conforming to society's strict, utterly mediocre norms.

We are lead to believe that if we do not conform we will be lustful, greedy animals, praying on each other, wild, out of control, and uncivilized. On the contrary, human beings are social by nature. Survival of the fittest does not mean the most ruthless, it means being the most collaborative. Tradition, beliefs and ideology, in a word 'culture,' are the handmaids of violence, not our innate nature.

The same Shakespearian tragedies

As one sage put it, 'we are grown up human beings after four or five million years.' But we are not. The human brain has expressed more or less the same capacities for, give or take, 40,000 years. As we travel back in history it becomes clear that we are repeating today the same Shakespearian tragedies as the pharaohs. We have not changed. Technological progress has lulled us deeper asleep, armed our 'basic instincts' with nuclear powers. World Wars, genocide, the Holocaust, religious inquisitions, and the current travesty in Iraq follow well established patterns.

The 20th century was the bloodiest in history. More than 170 million people were killed by governments, culture's henchmen, often justified by religious beliefs, with ten million being killed in World War I and fifty million killed in World War II. Nearly 70 percent were innocent civilians, women, old men and children blown to pieces by bombs dropped on cities by Great Britain and the United States. Aha, the land of the free and the brave - the only culture (thus far) to use nuclear weapons on civilian targets.

The unifying force that allows these patterns to repeat, generation after generation, is the image we have about ourselves and others, our national and personal identity, conformity and pride. The specific image we hold doesn't really matter. Mental images are basically the same just as all television images are basically the same. One image may be more blue, another a little darker, but as a structure they are more or less similar.

Identities are images and it is natural for our brain to create them. That is one of the unique capacities that define a brain from other systems. Knees, as far as we know, don't create images. Brains do. Each major region of the brain creates a unique form of image. The sensory motor brain produces sensory images - sight, taste, the scent of jasmine in the morning. Emotional centers produce images we call feelings - rage, jealousy and joy. The symbolic-imaginative centers of the brain produce thoughts, which are images, abstract beliefs, ideologies, psychological constructs, math, myths and superstitions.

Consciousness can be described as a constantly shifting montage of multiple image forms and styles. Images bubbling in the brain may be coherent and rational or not. We can create a physical image, perceive the difference between a man and a goat, for example, without attaching to that sensory image an abstract belief about them. We can have a feeling about the way a goat tugs on our jeans without having a belief about it. Add belief, such as the necessity of sacrificing a goat to appease the Gods, and everything changes. Both the man and the goat are transformed. The man becomes a priest and the animal a scapegoat whose blood washes away our mistakes. Adding the third neocortical image to the earlier sensory-motor and later limbic-mammalian-emotional images changes reality. Wow, that's very powerful. When applied to a person we call these transformative images our 'self,' or more precisely, our self-image. Apply the same image-making capacity to the collective and we have culture.

Bless the beast and the children

We do not choose our personal and cultural identity any more than we choose our mother language. If you are born in Japan you naturally speak Japanese. Little cells called mirror neurons mimic the environment and do so beneath the level of our awareness. The same is true of our cultural identity - with a little encouragement, that is, from our mentors, praise, shame and blame. We simply become the culture in which we are swimming without choice.

One can appreciate how well this system worked in the early millions of years of brain development. Mirror neurons insured that basic survival was instinctual. Survival strategies were communicated and embodied without choice. Montessori called the activity of mirror neurons the 'absorbent mind' of the child. Biologist Bruce Lipton reports on studies that compare the brain waves of the early child to that of an adult in a hypnotic trance, open, hypersensitive to suggestion, all taking place automatically without choice or discrimination. That is how our social image is formed, looking in the mirror of relationship provided by adults.

When the third brain, the neocortex, emerged, it ushered in the capacity to imagine. No longer were the images produced by the brain resonate representations of concrete external data. Nor were they corresponding inner feeling-images representing how we were relating to that external experience. A powerful third 'abstract' or 'imagined' image changed our reality. Beliefs were created to explain everything.

If we did not know 'the truth' we made up stories to explain thunder, lightning, the way fairies dance crystal patterns on glass, how storks deliver babies, that frogs cause warts, why the woman with a crooked nose is a witch, how God has chosen our group because we are righteous and good and those bastards over the hill are so evil. We made up all sorts of non-sense about who we and others are and those imagined images became our reality (nonsense being non-sensory, non-concrete, subjective, imagined images).

Producing an abstract identity, a self-world view, creates mental categories, invisible borders that separate me from you, us from them. Once this mental boundary is formed, be it a personal identity or the mass delusion called my nation, religion or culture, it must be defended. Wrap ourselves in a personal, national, religious identity and we plow the soil for conflict and violence - one nation under God, separate from and therefore in conflict with all others, individually and globally.

Human development depends on "knowing thy self.' The power of this well known phase begins when we see more deeply or beyond the cultural images that mask our true nature. But how can we 'know ourselves' when blinded so early by these images? We are blinded by a mental process that transforms us into a cultural cog long before we are able to discriminate the imagined, abstract image from our true nature. This natural mental process represents an invisible force, like gravity, that holds us prisoner to the past, that causes us to repeat the same old patterns, the same old traditions, century after century, believing, falsely, that we are progressing.

Prediction, conformity and control

How strong is this force? The Spanish, French and German Inquisitions are fine examples of the way cultural images planted in individual human brains conserve their pattern. Behind the veil of religious purity the medieval inquisitions, lasting 300 years, created a machine that efficiently centralized political authority, weakened local opposition to religious monarchs, purged the country of Jews, and consolidated wealth by confiscating the property of those accused. Millions of innocent people were tortured and murdered by Inquisitors following procedures set forth by Dominican monks, servants of Pope Innocent VIII (Innocent indeed, Orwellian double speak of the highest order). Here's how it happened.

The accused were told to confess, then stripped naked, shaved, pricked with needles for insensitive spots and examined for marks of the devil. The victim was told what was about to happen forcing in many cases the accused to commit to whatever the inquisitors wanted. While he or she was being tortured clerks recorded what was said and in many cases made up whatever would please the authorities. Each round of torture was worse than the one before.

The Inquisitor (professional torturer) was paid out of funds seized from the victim. If they had no money property was taken from relatives and given to those performing the torture, a self generative system if ever there was one. Who were the Inquisitors? They were guardians of the prevailing culture, government and religious leaders.

While the victims screamed, the torturers sprayed their instruments with so-called holy water, wore amulets, herbs, and crossed themselves. Some victims were horsewhipped. A sharp iron fork was used to mangle breasts. Red hot pincers were used to tear off flesh. Burning irons were inserted in vaginas and rectums. A device named the turcas was used to tear out fingernails. After the nails were ripped out needles were shoved into the quicks. Boots called bootkens were used to lacerate flesh and crush bone. Thumbscrews were used to crush the fingers and toes. Acid was poured on victims. Hands were immersed into pots of boiling oil. Eyes were gouged out by irons. Alcohol was poured on the head and set on fire. Water was poured down the throat with a knotted cloth, and then jerked out tearing up the victim's bowels. There was no limit to the cruelty. Anything was allowed in the name of God, country and culture. Make no mistake about it.

Most of us aren't subject to this type of cruelty, but tens of thousands are. Ask Amnesty International about Guantanamo, Paraguay, the Balkans, and Rwanda. The invisible force called culture will stop at nothing to bend, twist, snip and prune our amazing capacities like little bonsai trees. Ask Socrates, Jesus and Martin Luther King.

Bonding and belonging, to culture or our nature?

Why, after thousands of years, human beings are still torturing and murdering each other? As individuals we turn away in horror, but as herds, we do unspeakable things. The primal need to belong, twisted by imagined mental images, ideologies and beliefs, I suggest, is at the root of this insanity, a deep, abiding dis-ease at the thought of not being accepted, of not belonging. And this primal fear manifests as an image, an image of self.

Call it what you will - me, myself, I, the ego, deify it as a soul - there it is, the imagined image that we construct primarily from negative experiences - embarrassment, shame, rejection, humiliation. Strange but true, most of our beliefs, being the same structure, morph into our self-image. Attack one's belief in god or country and we react as if the deepest part of our being were spit upon.

The image defines us. It acts like a crustacean's shell, isolating us from the 'real' world (real being direct experience before it is transformed into an image by the brain). We live in a traveling jail, one that blinds us from our true nature. We see mostly what we believe, not realizing that beliefs are powerful forms of prejudice, prejudgments. Being infected with these cultural images of self and other we infect our children with the same insanity. How can we possibly raise shameless, free and responsible young people when we are none of these? Every second our social image is active, the potential for embarrassment, rejection and shame is there, hovering in the shadows, waiting for the next screw up, the next moment of public humiliation, always conserving the status quo.

It takes courage and will, you say, to overcome our malady. Will and courage exist only when we are in prison, the prison being the image. We are imprisoned by images and then try to use other images to break free.

Like a Chinese finger puzzle, the harder we try the tighter the trap becomes. Beliefs are images. Ideologies are images. The image I have about you, me, Jews, blacks, whites, saints, lawyers and whores are all the same. You can't solve a problem at the level of the problem. We can't break the chains that images forge with another image. Trying to do so simply adds another set of bars to our prison.

Behind the image is another form of perception and action - pure observation, just listening, completely, with all of our energy and attention. Watch animals or babies observe something new, unknown. Martial artists call this unmediated attention "beginner's mind." This immediate, complete attention is not the result of memory, or more accurately the misuse of memory. Indeed, we misuse memory all the time.

We use memory appropriately to fix a tire, to dial a phone number. Action based on psychological memory, ideologies, mythic imagination, racial, religious belief, and personal images is different, suspect, highly subjective, biased. The unquestioned assumptions implicit in these mental images prevent direct perception, unmediated, unprejudiced action, what we might call real intelligence, from expressing. Rarely do we discriminate between an appropriate use and the misuse of memory. Most often we treat all memory the same, true information and misinformation, fact and superstition. The result is the confused, often contradictory, violent, aggressive, self-righteous and defensive state of affairs with which most live, day in and day out. There is no freedom, no responsible action in such a mind nor in the society this mind creates.

As one teacher put it, 'to set humanity absolutely, unconditionally free, one must live fully in the present moment, passionately, giving every ounce of energy and attention one has to transcend the mental and emotional images that keep us prisoners of the past.'

If we love our children, would we consider anything less, knowing intimately that they are taking their cues from us from the moment of conception forward? If this passionate, clear, intelligent state of mind is our standard, and I believe it should be, what college should our children attend? Which branch of the Ivy League will wrench them out of normality and place them next to Socrates, Jesus, Shakespeare, Lao Tse and the Buddha? That should be our goal, should it not? Why else would these true individuals take their bows in the chorus line of humanity if not as models for every child to strive for, to embody and surpass?

To appreciate the phrase 'raising shameless, responsible, free young people,' we must understand its syntax, seeing that the active word is raising, modeling, guiding, setting the example, moment by moment, as we greet the postal clerk, pet the dog, clear the table and argue with the IRS. We are the shoulders upon which the next critical generation is standing. We are the compass, the pole star, and the trade winds that fill their sails.

It is not what we say, rather what we do, that matters, how we live each moment, sing our song or hide in the shadows, dance our dance or pretend the music isn't just right, protest when our government (preemptively) strikes another, or sit comfortably in our easy-chairs lulled to sleep by the flickering light of Orwell's telly.

Long before Orwell wrote *1984*, Huxley predicted our stupor. We are living in his Brave New World, sedated, herded, controlled, more than half asleep, daydreaming that we are in control of our lives. And in this state, which culture conditions, we pretend to know how to raise shameless, responsible, free young people - the blind leading the blind in increasingly dangerous territory.

Steve Jobs and Bill Gates don't have degrees from Harvard. Einstein hated school. It dulled the mind, killed the spirit, and he knew it. So why do so many strive so hard to get into these over priced luxury country clubs, pay so much to be at the top of a mediocre class?

Money can buy a position in the mainstream. But money can't buy what we really need: integrity, honesty, passion, intelligence, empathy, lightheartedness, willingness to risk, and risk again, real creativity, persistence, hope, optimism, courage, and other core capacities every new human being is born with, and that conservative culture (religions, traditions, mandatory schooling and parenting) often strip away.

Monsters from the Id

We plucked fruit from the tree of knowledge and bit deeply. Well, not really. We evolved new brain structures and with them the capacity to create mental images, to dream undreamed of possibilities. Turned outward this capacity opens the door to insight, the Eureka experience, perception of new patterns and possibilities, pure creativity and immense power. Turned inward, psychologically, this same capacity creates 'monsters from the id.' (*Monsters from the Id*, authored by Clark Ashton Smith, demonstrates the link between poetry and horror, good and evil, both emerging in the same unconscious. *Forbidden Planet*, the 1959 science fiction classic, made the phrase famous, taking a dark view of the primitive forces lurking inside everyone - "monsters of the Id," as one character put them.)

There it is, one creative force, leading simultaneously to enlightenment and to hell, depending on how the wind blows, on the environmental factors that distill or cloud our doors of perception. Now we are getting close.

To 'know thy self' means to see behind the image and understand the creative power that produces the image, all images. This takes energy, attention, much more than is needed to be lulled to sleep by the image, or to be admitted to Harvard. At the core of every true spiritual practice is the cultivation of this energy and attention.

Perhaps you have heard the Zen saying 'If you see Buddha, kill him.' Seeing Buddha is seeing an image. It is the prison. To get out of jail you must see more, see beyond even the concept of beyond. One definition of mystical is seeing that which cannot be reduce to a symbol or metaphor. "Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha."

In that instant, that seeing, you are a free and open channel for immeasurable intelligence and insight. But we don't know who we are. We think we are the image. The illusion is built into our design.

The brain's basic operating system is based on images. Images percolate in the mind like bubbles in champagne. A mind full of images, however, loses track of its bubbles. Some are 'resonate representations' of external impressions. Many emerge from somatic scars, residual imprints from experiences felt years before or even lifetimes before 'reincarnating now' as genetic predispositions. In low states of attention, which is our mediocre norm, these bubbles burst into consciousness causing us to reflexively do all sorts of things misbelieving that we are the captains of our ships, when a closer look reveals that the tail is clearly wagging the dog.

Move your hand behind your back and you know where it is, a phenomenon called proprioception. David Bohm, one of the brightest minds of the 20th century, observed that we have not evolved the same tracking ability with mental images. They happen so fast, one merging onto the other. How can we 'know ourselves' when we have not cultivated the attention necessary to understand the fundamental nature and structure of our own thoughts?

We are enchanted by the image-making capacity of our own mind and don't know it. The images are so real and powerful that they consume, moment by moment, all the attention we have, leaving no attention left over to pull back the curtain and see that the wizard is just a salesman from Kansas.

How are we going to raise shameless, free and responsible young people in our present state, consumed by cultural images, each and every one carrying the perennial threat of shame? Who are we kidding? The golden rule prevails. We do unto others what they will eventually do unto us.

Each one of us has the power to break the spell, to generate and invest the energy and attention it takes to be fully present, awake, aware, completely involved in living this moment as fully as possible, without being shackled by the crippling social images. But it takes more energy, more attention than is our mediocre norm. Each of us can be truly innocent and in that state unleash vast intelligence that is now caged by social images. Each of us can be that boy, stand in the crowd and say: 'the King has no clothes.'

The question is: can an adult who is secure and self-contained in the images culture provides, lead another out of bondage? Shame, freedom and responsibility are states of mind. A mind tethered to national, religious, ethnic, scientific, political ideologies and personal beliefs is not free. Freedom, to such a mind, is like the freedom of a caged animal. It can do whatever it wants within very narrow boundaries.

We must be shameless; we must be free and responsible, now. To do that we must see beyond the images that bind us to our violent past. Then, maybe, our kids will have a shot and can take their rightful place next to the rare individuals that have shown us the way.