

Session 20 – December 8

Working with – and honouring – one’s emotions and feelings is an exquisitely sensitive task and a richly rewarding way of being in the world. Every feeling that we notice has the seeds of meaning in it. All the colours and textures of our experience – the melody and the harmony of our lives – come from the meanings we make, which are shaped by our emotional states and also guide the flow of our subsequent emotional states. It’s an elegant, circular, finely-tuned process that I have enjoyed talking to you about in this course.

If you have enjoyed your experience of the course, this is a product of your feelings while you were here, the emotional state in which you have engaged with it, and the meanings you have formed at every step along the way. One of the great things about U3A courses is that people come because they want to come, not because they have to come. It is your intention that brings you here and which brings about any nice feelings of satisfaction or achievement that you might experience here.

So it is with life – we are seeking a good result out of everything we do – but it doesn’t always happen like that. The final principle that I want to raise for your consideration this year is about the difference between things that work out well for us and things that don’t. Of course, we are always subject to unexpected external events and circumstances over which we have no control – our best-laid plans can be wrecked completely by outside forces. Even so, our attitude of mind is always a major determinant of the kind of outcomes that we experience.

As we saw when talking about hope, an optimistic attitude does often predispose to better outcomes and a lack of hope can be disastrous. We also found, I think, that this is rather simplistic. There is more to achieving good outcomes than simply hoping for them. At a deeper level there is an emotional state I call *confidence* and an attitude of mind known as *commitment* that I think are offshoots of the fundamental emotion of love – and also have to do with fear – that I wanted to talk about today.

In relation to hope and despair, I haven’t yet mentioned Martin Seligman and his colleagues who have made a whole school of psychology out of the concepts of ‘learned helplessness’ and ‘learned optimism.’ I don’t really want to elaborate on it too much. The rat experiments out of which this kind of thinking first came were pretty awful – in my opinion. Rats were forced to swim in a jar of water with a water spout spraying on top of them until they eventually gave up swimming and drowned. Normal rats could survive for 60-80 hours, but if pre-treated for learned helplessness (e.g. by holding them tightly in a steel glove for a while) they only survived 3-5 hours before dropping to the bottom. It certainly is a dramatic difference – entirely due to their state of mind – a lack of hope – or a lack of the will to live. If he rescued a rat and then put it back in, its hope was revived quite considerably and it could last longer. These are important experiments, perhaps, but I wouldn’t want to have carried them out.

Frankl’s seven core principles for integrating feeling and thinking to make meaning

Intentionality occurs at a deeper level than our conscious awareness (intent)

Commitment is essential for enjoyment and satisfaction

Confidence is a loving regard for the unknown

I’d like to invite you to use your experience of this course (and I will do the same) to consider what motivates us to do certain things and to stick at things over a period of time – how we form intentions to do things and how those intentions actually work out as time goes on. I’m sure you

would be a bit like me in that you sometimes have an intention to do something, but you don't get around to doing it – or perhaps you start on something that seemed like a good idea, but you lose interest in it after a while and so you don't continue.

Regarding our intentions

You might recall from earlier in the course (mainly Session 13) I said that, in the science of emotions, intention and intentionality were not the same thing – that intentionality occurs at a deeper level than your conscious awareness. Significant parts of our emotions lie in our subconscious mind where they influence the meanings that we make far more than we realise. Intentionality is defined as the structure of our mind that gives meaning to our experience and so it is the 'knowing' that guides our 'doing' at all times.

Intent is defined as 'the directing of an action towards some future goal that is consciously defined and chosen by the actor' and motive is 'the reason and the explanation for the action,' but what we actually do really stems from the structure of our mind as a whole – not just from conscious intent.

There is a new book called *The Hidden Brain* by Shankar Vedantam, an American science journalist, which is full of examples of unconscious bias – all those situations where people's actions seem to be at odds with what they thought, or you thought, their intentions were. He said that unconscious bias is mostly explained away in terms of prejudice or partiality or some obvious social defect, but neuroscience has now shown it to be part of the normal working of the human mind.

By the 'hidden brain' he means those parts of our mind that are manipulated by subtle influences of which we are completely unaware. People don't feel manipulated – they rationalise their biases away and even claim ownership for actions they had not intended. The outcomes are sometimes comical, sometimes very helpful, but can also have deadly consequences such as, for example, the Shakespearian drama of the demonic Iago manipulating the gullible Othello into believing his wife was unfaithful and eventually doing her in.

New research shows how widespread and common this is. Yet so much of our thinking and planning is based on the assumption that human behaviour is the product of knowledge and conscious intention. This attitude is quite impervious to contradictory evidence. He calls it the 'myth of intention.' We think we know exactly what we are doing and we expect to end up doing exactly what we choose to do, but it isn't as simple as that.

One example is a rather poignant story about a woman who had to help identify her attacker in a police investigation. Everything was very thorough – all procedures were followed – she had quite a good description and eventually picked him out of a line up and he was convicted. She had slight misgivings, but friends assured her that this was only to be expected. Many years later, DNA evidence showed him to be innocent. He was a very gracious man and wanted to meet her – she was assured he bore no malice towards her. When they met he smiled and she saw that his teeth were crooked and knew immediately he wasn't her attacker. During the investigation, all the logic and procedure had convinced her of something that, deep down, her mind knew was not correct.

Another example of how people can be influenced unwittingly was an experiment with an 'honour system' payment for a beverage station. Whenever the small picture above the beverage station was of flowers the number of people who didn't bother to pay was 3 – 7 times higher than when the picture was a face with eyes. No one seemed to be aware that the picture was regularly changed. In another experiment, a waitress found that she got more tips when she repeated the customers orders back to them than when she simply made a bland comment about what they had ordered. The customer's behaviour was being influenced by her repeating the order although they

were not really conscious of this.

Unconscious bias is most evident in widespread discrimination against women and black people in many American studies. Vedantam did some interesting research around the last US election in which there was a female and a black candidate competing for the Democrat nomination. Even people who vehemently claimed to be totally impartial exhibited considerable bias, which he says is unavoidable.

He believes that, because babies watch people's faces all the time, they develop such a strong inbuilt bias that no amount of education or conscious effort could ever entirely overcome it. This doesn't seem to be a good explanation for a bias against women! He describes the conscious brain as the pilot and the hidden brain as a kind of autopilot – it mostly comes into effect at a time when the pilot is not paying attention to that particular aspect of his operation – so he is off guard.

Another powerful unconscious force is the lure of conformity – we mostly do what others are doing when we are in a group. People in crowds generally don't help someone who is being attacked – unless several other people start to do something. When the first of the Twin Towers was hit by a plane in New York, very few people in the other tower took the lifts or stairs downwards, but those who did escaped unhurt.

This manifests itself in what he calls the 'tunnel' of terrorism and extremism. It is hard to imagine how the Jonestown mass suicide could have occurred until you look into the extreme conformity that had developed in that community. Terrorists and suicide bombers are often believed to be fanatically religious, but he says they just get in with a closed community which has a tunnel vision and there they have the potential to become heroes – gradually their mind becomes totally convinced that what they are doing must be right.

Finally, there is what he calls the telescope effect. When we hear of thousands of people dying in a foreign land that is a long way away, most of us can't really relate to it as we would a fellow human being in our neighbourhood. When one little dog was abandoned on a sinking ship near Hawaii, thousands of people were outraged and sent money to save it. If it had been a thousand dogs that would not have happened.

These are examples of the unconscious bias which is normal for the human mind. I wonder if there was some unconscious bias for any of you, or for me, in our decision to partake of this course? In any case, we did it, so let's see what we can learn about the working of our mind by considering the experience we have had.

Commitment, joy and satisfaction

When you decided to come to this U3A course your mind made a commitment – which could have been a vague notion or it could have been quite definite. Either way, you continued with the course throughout the year. If you enjoyed it and found your own meanings along the way, that is because you committed your mind in that direction – you orientated your mind accordingly. You may recall from Session 13 that, strictly speaking, we don't choose outcomes, but we do choose the direction in which we will head – we can do this when we are in the present moment. Having chosen a direction, we find one thing leads to another – our mind's journey then runs along a certain path.

Whatever you enjoyed about the course – that will be the most meaningful part for you – because there is a connection between commitment, meaning and joy. The mind at work is also a mind at play. Just as there cannot be freedom without responsibility, there cannot be joy without commitment. By committing yourself you open your mind to a satisfying experience – a meaningful experience.

Affairs of the mind are inevitably uncertain, yet you can always make satisfying progress when

you feel quietly confident and reasonably definite about heading in a certain direction. In practice, we are often half-hearted or equivocal about projects or plans because of the uncertainty associated with them. There is a place for reasonable caution, of course, but when we reflect back we often wish we had taken a few more risks.

Commitment is a way of trusting in the unknown. It is a positive attitude towards the unknown and an expression of trust in the potential of the human mind. It comes from what you believe in – whatever has meaning for you – in the depth of your intentionality.

Goethe's famous words about this are some of the most encouraging and inspiring ever written. He wrote:

'Until one is committed, there is always hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising to one's favour all manner of unforeseen accidents and meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamed would come his way. Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.'

This fits with the latest findings in the biology of mind. In a biological sense, what happens is that one connection leads to another and we find ourselves carried towards something good if we aim towards something good. There may be lots of unexpected detours or even roadblocks, but we travel forward by believing in the emotional integrity and validity of our mind.

If we can embrace all aspects of our emotional experience – valuing every feeling that comes along – and respecting our intuitive abilities that stem from our emotional states – we give ourselves the best possible chance of personal satisfaction and truly meaningful lives.

The seven aspects of knowing that I wrote about in my previous course (and in the book *Mind and Love*) can be summarised as (1) recognising our autonomy as self-governing beings, (2) valuing our connectedness in all its forms, (3) taking responsibility for the world that we ourselves bring forth, (4) honouring our emotions as the lynchpin of our mind, (5) accepting each present moment as it is, (6) attending to what we say and hear as we co-create our culture and (7) worshipping something outside of ourselves and loving the unknown.

Frankl's seven core principles (see previous Session) are from a psychological framework, rather than a biological one, but they contain the same elements. Firstly you take responsibility for being able to choose your attitude to something. Secondly, you know that you have to make meaning. Thirdly you try to find this meaning in individual moments. Fourthly, you don't force it with your rational mind as that can work against you. Fifthly, you stand back and look at yourself from a distance – this is the value of reflection. The sixth one is what he calls de-reflection, which is the opposite of self-absorption, and finally, there is self-transcendence – looking beyond ourselves to recognise that ultimate meaning will always be beyond our comprehension, yet we can have complete faith in it. Why? Simply because it works.

If we embrace the unknown as well as the known we don't have to know the ultimate meaning of everything – enjoying the mystery is part of the fun. We are blessed with a mind that can always make some meaning of our existence because it can always make some connections – not perfectly, but well enough. My joy fluctuates from day to day, but deep down it comes from gratitude that, having committed to believing in this process, I find this kind of outcome is granted to me.

The very using of one's mind is a commitment to life. The main purpose of life – and the main pleasure – is to give one's life meaning. If I am committed to my life I want to do it as well as possible so I declare that I love my life and I expect my mind to make it meaningful for me.

It was harder for me to come to realise that there is no necessity to be analytical or strive too hard for intellectual clarification – unless you are required to write a thesis. Wonder and enjoyment are the outcomes of most importance to the mind. Rudolph Steiner was saying this a century ago:

‘In an age of criticism . . . ideals are degraded. Reverence, awe, adoration and wonder are replaced by other feelings – they are pushed more and more into the background. As a result, everyday life offers very few opportunities for their development. Anyone seeking higher knowledge must create these feelings inwardly, instilling them in the soul. This cannot be done by studying. It can only be done by living.’

Joyful commitment is what will keep the human mind alive – for individuals and for the whole world. Where the mind goes in the future depends on the intentionality of each one of us, which will determine each new connection we make. Commitment is a certain orientation we assume, combined with a deep trust that the amalgam of our will and our love will go on making meaning for us.

Not caring will be our greatest danger. Emotional states such as apathy and indifference deny the possibility of commitment or joy and jeopardise the flow of will and love. A sense of futility often stems from a misguided desire to control, rather than to appreciate the flow. The superficial aspect of our mind tells us it needs to control, but it is the true nature of our mind that we need a sense of coherence far more than we need to have control. As long as it means something to be a living human being, here and now, we will keep our mind alive.

Charles Birch compared the way we humans think of ourselves with the way we think of our world. We see ourselves as having consciousness, free will and purpose whereas we think of the world as being mindless and non-purposive. This is to deny love for our world. If we love it we will give it meaning.

Richard Tarnas wrote a parable about two different kinds of suitor for the world. One was cold and critical, attributed no goodness or nobility to the world and his attitude was disrespectful and exploitative; the other admired the world for its mysterious wisdom, saw it as at least as intelligent as himself and had a desire to co-create with it for some, slightly hazy, but mutually beneficial, purpose. Which one do you think will be the most successful suitor?

A commitment to our lives will carry with it a commitment to take care of our world. ‘A barren, destructive mind produces a barren, devastated environment,’ Daisaku Ikeda has written. This is the opposite of a reverence for life – which also means a reverence for mind, but not for its rationality – rather for its role in connecting us to one another and our world. Maturana wrote:

‘The basic illness of the soul of modern humanity is its blindness to its connectedness with all dimensions of nature through the belief that what makes us human beings human is rationality through which we have power over nature in a linear dynamics blind to its circular nature.’

He went on to say we think of ourselves, mistakenly, as simply rational animals when we are actually emotional beings who have a strong tendency to use rationality to justify our desires. Our emotional mind is the source of the meaning and the enjoyment that comes from doing what we believe in doing.

The most striking cultural change that could affect our mind in the future is the increasing reliance on electronic forms of communication. The so-called ‘screen culture’ is affecting all aspects of our lives. People are discussing the ‘convergence of evolution, group mind and the internet’ and Donald Duchinos, for example, sees our passion for internet and cellphone interaction as today’s manifestation of our deepest spiritual quest. He coined the term, neurosphere – just a slight variation on Teilhard de Chardin’s famous term, noosphere, which referred to an evolving global consciousness.

The connectedness within us and the patterns of connection around us will evolve together. The

challenge will be to satisfy the emotional basis of our search for meaning using forms of language that are often not face-to-face and are becoming increasingly cryptic. Fortunately, there will always be the unknown as our stimulus and our reminder, lest we become too complacent, too clever and too controlling.

Heeding love

When unhealthy addictive patterns develop, as they always do, two things are needed. Firstly, love to loosen the patterns that bind, which is the unlearning part of the process; secondly, new doings to create new patterns of behaviour, which will be new frameworks in our mind. The best catalyst for positive evolutionary development will be to heed love in all our endeavours. As long as we do this we should not become trapped by the limitation of our own knowing.

There is a sense in which you can let love lead. To do this, you need to be able to ‘hear’ so you can ‘see’ where love is pointing. Rather than try harder to make life work, which it does anyway, the idea is to bring more loving into it. We will always be moving in the direction of our loving.

This love is not, primarily, a moral virtue; it has been accorded that status through the evolution of our humanness. But, firstly, it was – and is – a biological necessity. Without it we would gradually lose the experience of communality and without that we would have no future. If love did not exist, our evolutionary journey as a species would have ended long ago. We know it’s essential, but we don’t really know what love is, because it involves the unknown.

Rational explanation can’t capture what love is. The only way we can know love is to experience it. Certain kinds of experience are more revealing than others. Because music exists, we know some things we could not know otherwise.

Yehudi Menuin told how music exposed the limitations of rational explanation, which he said creates a kind of order that is no longer real or alive, having lost its wholeness and most of its meaning by alienating itself from us. Yes, rationality provides some of the building blocks of knowing, but in the end it cannot construct the true reality. What we recognise as life has an organic quality of wholeness and flow which music can evoke in our experience.

Musical performance is a great metaphor for life and mind because it’s usually done with others and may include improvisation, which is not so much a skill you develop as an unlearning of habitual patterns of non-awareness and disconnectedness. It is precisely the experience you would imagine was created for holons to operate within hierarchies of holons. When you listen to or otherwise experience someone else’s musical performance, you get a sense of this integrative consciousness occurring.

Menuin described improvisation in music as the greatest sense of freedom you can ever experience, because he said you cannot know what freedom is until you are aware of the discipline called for by the larger scheme of things. Then, you can be truly yourself, knowing this is not at the expense of the larger system – it is the larger system manifest within you. This is the sacred work of our mind.

What you enjoy and what you love will have meaning for you, which gives it life as it keeps you alive. We see into things by loving them – our mind gives to them the life it also needs, as it gives them its meaning. This is what I believe you and I have done in our experience of this course.

Confidence in all our feelings

There is a little ditty I came across somewhere: ‘confidence is the start of it, joy will be a part of it, love is at the heart of it.’ Confidence is an emotional state in which our attitude to the unknown is the crucial element. It is a loving regard for the unknown, which comes from learning to trust all our feelings and emotions. They are the flowing streams of vitality and life that make us who we are

and connect us to one another in that precious human way that, deep down, we revere.

This does not mean that anybody has a perfect life. In fact it is the imperfection and the trouble that keeps us humble by reminding us that we are simply one part of some bigger scheme of things. It is the flow of our feelings, emotions and meanings that brings us back to health whenever that is needed.

Karla McLaren's book, *The Language of Emotions*, is an example of the healing power of listening to your feelings and welcoming all your emotions. It is subtitled 'what your feelings are trying to tell you.' She describes herself as an 'empath' and says everybody can develop the kind of empathy that she has if they work at it. When you 'welcome the emotional flow' in yourself you will find it easier to connect with the emotional flow in others.

In Session 18 I mentioned her simple procedure for getting in touch with your sadness, which is particularly helpful for bringing about useful change in your life. She also has an exercise for arousing fear which is to listen intently until you can detect some very faint sound and then go and investigate it – try to find out what is making that noise. By doing this you come to realise how valuable fear is, when it is quietly working away in the background.

Having confidence involves both love and fear because you regard the unknown as your guide as well as your comfort – this means you must stay alert – maintain your awareness – for your own protection as well as for your fulfilment. Taking an interest in what is happening depends on having the threat-protection system operating, but not too intrusively – fairly quietly in the background.

Karla McLaren's approach in this book is therapeutic, but many of her general comments about the feelings and emotions we have considered in this course are interesting. She differs from me in saying that love is not an emotion because it's a steadfast promise – in other words, a commitment. The way I see it, that ability to commit also stems from the emotional structure of our mind.

She makes it clear that two of the least desired emotions, anger and fear, are absolutely necessary. Anger restores boundaries that are lost through disassociating – such as happens with severe emotional trauma. It doesn't need to be prolonged. Fear sharpens your intellectual focus and your intuitive knowing – to the extent that it can make you more aware, without compromising your drive and calm systems, it is a good thing.

Anger is for protection and restoration, she writes – 'healthy anger is the honourable sentry or boundary-holder of your psyche.' Flowing freely you hardly notice it because it doesn't get involved where it's not needed. It is good for maintaining confidence in yourself. Thus it is important to honour anger in others also.

Jealousy and envy are mixtures of anger and fear – honouring them you learn something important about yourself. Disgust is the most natural of emotions and it shed light on your own shadow – on who you really are.

Apathy and boredom are masks for feelings that you haven't listened to or understood. The message in apathy is loss of boundaries. Guilt and shame are useful for restoring integrity after your boundaries have been damaged from the inside. Acknowledging them and letting them flow is healing – authentic shame leads to authentic self-respect.

Sadness offers life-giving fluidity and rejuvenation in any situation – it is about releasing something and letting go so that change can happen. Grief is the deepest river of your soul immersing you in the river of all souls.

She calls depression an 'ingenious stagnation' – a necessary 'stop sign.' Happiness is a momentary emotion that helps us identify things that are fun and rewarding – a nice little 'rest stop for the soul.' A Chinese philosopher called it 'the most dangerous emotion' because of the way we single it out in our quest for meaning.

Finally, fear is illustrated by her ‘sharp listening exercise’ that I mentioned earlier. When you pinpoint those mysterious little sounds you can thank the emotion that helped you find them and explain them. Free-flowing fear brings you awareness, intuition and focus – it hones your senses bringing a readiness and clarity that would not be there otherwise. Without fear the mind gets fuzzy. Panic and terror, however, are a frozen form of fear, which need to be released.

Becoming stuck in any feelings will soon undermine our confidence. McLaren’s golden rule is to let the feelings flow and enjoy them all.

There are many things about our feelings and emotions that remain a mystery despite a lot of scientific research and analysis. Some people quite naturally welcome this mystery and would rather not know more about them. For some people, feelings and emotions have come to be an unwelcome accompaniment that complicates their lives. Rather than tools for us to use, they tend to be seen as undesirable forces which overwhelm us or hold us back.

By getting to know a bit more about them I think you get to see how valuable they are and hopefully come to regard them with love and respect. I have tried to show in this course how all our feelings and emotions exist to help us live our lives – they are given to us to use and we could not do without them.