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(Russell G. Wells)

FREEDOM AS A PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT

BY

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INTRODUCTION

This essay is an enquiry into the significance of a phenomenon which I have called "Mystification".[1] A person is mystified when he has come to regard himself as something he is not; and in consequence, feeling that his actions must be fitting to this image of himself, he does not act in terms of what he wants, but rather in terms of what he thinks he wants. Therefore he is not free; for freedom consists in doing what one wants.

It is helpful to think of a parable of the nineteenth century Hindu saint, Sri Ramakrishna. A tiger cub, whose mother had died in giving it birth, was adopted by a herd of goats, who suckled it with their own offspring. It learnt to make a bleating noise and to eat grass, and it grew up to be slim and meek on this diet. One day the herd of goats was attacked by a fierce old tiger, who was appalled at this abnormal specimen, and, seizing it by the scruff of the neck, carried it off to his lair. There he forced it to eat raw flesh. At first the young tiger was sickened; but when he tasted blood, he felt an unfamiliar gratification and reached eagerly for more. He felt elated and intoxicated, and then opened his mouth in a huge yawn, as if he had awoken from a long sleep. He stretched his

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[1] Following R.D. Laing in his "The Divided Self".

Capacities, however, strive for expression; and some people experience ever-increasing Absurdity, Shame, and Isolation. Absurdity is the experience of acting in a way which would satisfy one's apparent wants, and yet failing to be satisfied even though the apparent want is satisfied. Shame is the experience of not having been "true to oneself". Isolation is the experience of making only superficial and formal contacts with other people.

If these experiences become so intense as to be intolerable, a person may manage to prescind from his inauthentic existence, and to begin a process of Self-discovery. This is the transition to the second stage, which is the State of Disillusionment and Disorientation. In this stage, a person becomes open to primitive experience which has often been forgotten since childhood. This may be exhilarating or frightening, and is probably both of these. If it is not too frightening for too long, it will be maintained and accepted as authentic experience and an expression of the person's true nature. It may be said of a person at this stage that he has become reconciled to himself, and committed to doing what he really wants to do. He may be thought of as having come to see the world without too many prejudicing preconceptions and generalizations and of being able to actualize his

wants without fear. To the extent that a person is thus reconciled and committed (i.e., has achieved the third stage), he is free in the sense with which we are concerned here.

This process is not one with a definite beginning, a definite sequence of events, or a definite end called "freedom", even though that is how it must be presented for the purposes of clarity. Nor should it be regarded as a once-in-a-lifetime process which guarantees freedom thereafter. Rather it is a recurrent cycle, for Self-actualization is an endless process and is indeed a kind of growth. Every completion of the cycle is a preliminary to its recurrence; and we might say that what a person becomes reconciled and committed to is the repeated experience of uncertainty, the repeated discovery of self-deception, and the acceptance of this state as natural, desirable, and essential for further growth.

Now all the foregoing is an interpretation and a "placing" of the indisputable facts of Absurdity, Shame and Isolation, for the purpose of drawing out their significance. It will be contended here that the "freedom-cycle" indicates something so fundamental about human nature that it enables conclusions to be drawn about the basis of morality and the Good Life.