

Addendum: A world in Crisis

*It may be that darkness has descended over you
in order that He may make you aware
of the value of His blessings upon you.*

Hikmah 198

In a lecture for a Dutch audience, Hazrat Inayat Khan compared the human nature with a piglet and a bee.¹

Put a piglet in a beautiful environment, he said, give it pure food and clean hay; it will always discover a little filth somewhere and will walk towards it.

Put the piglet in your garden, and it will walk past the most beautiful flowers; it will leave your tidy paths and search and sniff, until it has found some manure or mud somewhere, to root in it with delight. This is the piglet's way of enjoying life.

Meanwhile, what does the bee do? As long as, somewhere in your garden, there is a tiny flower to discover, it will find it and fly off to get the honey.

You would prefer to make a detour past a dung heap or mud puddle, to turn your head and to keep your nose closed, but in the middle of the dung heap the bee will discover another flower and will suck honey from the mud puddle. This is the bee's way of enjoying life.

Here is a story on the bee perspective:

Jesus was walking with his disciples when they spotted a dead dog on the side of the road. Flies were swarming around the carcass and the smell of rotten meat was in the air.

The disciples immediately went to the other side of the road to keep their distance, but Jesus walked straight towards the carcass and pointed at the teeth of the dog.

'Look how beautifully white his teeth are!'

According to Hazrat Inayat Khan, we sometimes resemble the piglet and sometimes the bee. Some of us are more piglet than bee, others more bee than piglet.

Piglets can discover dirt in each hero and in each benefactor. A piglet roots everywhere; in traditions and reputations; in programs and teachings; in the authority of art and science. The piglet, the Indian master said, is the merciless critic, who sees blackness everywhere and smells bad odors everywhere; he makes even the most ornate garden into a garbage heap and the neatest arbor into a stable.

I trust the reader will allow this writer to just this once look at the present western society as a piglet and uproot the surface.

This book is written during a crisis. At the moment of writing – the first half of 2020 – a large part of the world population is staying at home, or practicing social distancing when going out and connecting through internet, all due to the pandemic coronavirus. This virus is threatening our physical health, the measurements taken to contain the virus are undermining the economy on a global scale.

¹ Nieuwsblad van Friesland, 15th February 1924. From the Nekbakht archives.

All alarm bells go off. As they should do.

But another pandemic disease has been with us for decades and even longer. Its germs were sown at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution and the signs can be read and felt everywhere. Yet no measurements are taken and few alarm bells are heard. Those who do warn are voices crying in the wilderness.

The need to climb the social ladder, the rat race, the iron regime of time-management and a full agenda, and the demands for a perfection that cannot be met with, lead on a pandemic scale to feelings of unhappiness, low self-worth, and depression. People blame themselves instead of realizing the absurdity of the demands, as earthly perfection by definition is an impossibility. Social, work or peer pressure lead to eating disorders, burn-outs, and other forms of psychological depletion.

In material sense the western world population has never been this well off, yet the lack of a goal in life, the loss of direction and meaning, of an ideal and a purpose to live for, are taking their toll. If, as the Dalai Lama says, every action that leads to unhappiness is unskillful, we as a society are showing a severe case of unskillfulness.

As a people, we are less happy than ever in spite of the material abundance we live in. Or maybe *because* of this abundance, as our material wealth binds us firmly and addictively to the physical side of our being, leaving little or no space for the psychological and spiritual sides of our nature.

A large part of the population in the western world has little to wish or strive for beyond a better position – which means getting deeper into the rat race. At the same time, another, less fortunate part of the population has so much to wish for that life seems hopeless, a *cul de sac*. The world is split in two, but a majority of both parts seem to be unhappy.

Darwinism is misinterpreted and used to promote competition and the survival of the fittest as economic model – wrapped up in the promise that this is the best for all. Science – the new religion we adhere to – offers no opening to any form of sense or purpose in life by declaring that evolution, cosmos, and life are random and a matter of chance. If there is a God, he plays dice.

Obvious signs of this unhappiness among rich and poor alike are the soaring suicide rates,² and the quadrupling of the use of anti-depressants in the US in a mere 20 years' time.³

Should we see these all these victims as collateral damage, the unfortunate but inevitable side-effects of our life style? We can get people on the moon and rockets to the fringes of the solar system, so solving these issues must be possible as well. But, as the American Sufi mystic Samuel L. Lewis said, 'Problems arise because people don't accept the consequences of the solutions.'⁴

² The WHO estimates are over 800.000 per year, exceeding the number of casualties of corona.

³ See Emily Esfahani Smith, p. 30 (Dutch edition) for more numbers and their sources. Her book *The Power of Meaning* advocates 'a life that matters' and offers different tools to do this by cultivating connections, identifying, and working towards a purpose, telling your life story and how you fit into this world, and opening up and seeking out mystery (the transcendent). Smith is the daughter of immigrated Sufi parents from Iran.

⁴ Interview with Murshid SAM in the film *Sunseed*.

The solution lies not in medication and anti-depressants, as they dumb or mute the psyche and rob people of a large part of their humanity. The solution lies where the cause can be found, so in bringing back sense and meaning in our lives. As these are part of our spirit, we need – on an individual basis and as a society – to bring something of the Divine back into our lives.

Not in a fundamentalist form or to return to a theocracy. That has proven to bring us nowhere and it would be taking a step back in the evolution of human consciousness. No, we need to move forward. We can do this by finding a higher cause for living than mere material wealth. As we saw, this spiritual evolution was the vision of the mystic-scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

As a society, we have been neglecting the spiritual side of our being in favor of materialistic values, dictated by our economy. Even though most decision makers accept the facts of global warming, serious measurements to really do something about it are postponed. The pandemic loss of meaning and happiness puts us in an even worse position, as our society denies its psychological and spiritual poverty almost completely. We need to change our way of living and therefore our views on economy, basically a pyramid game, based as it is on perpetual growth. Until now, the price of that solution has been too high.

They say that every crisis is an opportunity. The word *crisis* comes from the Greek word for turning point or judgment. Hippocrates (c. 460–c. 370 BCE), whose oath medical doctors still swear, used the word for a turning point in a disease, the yes-or-no point where the disease can go either way, towards recovery or towards death.

As a consequence of the pandemic crisis, we are slowly getting used to a life style of going out less, shopping less, flying less, using the car less. We have taken a step back to a society of less.

This is where an opportunity lies. A French saying tells us that taking a step back means you can jump better. Less is more. We can all see now how true this is for our environment, as, due to the corona lockdown, inhabitants of Delhi, India, can breathe clean air again.

This isn't saying we will jump better, as the step back was enforced rather than voluntarily, but at least we are able to see more clearly where we can jump to. The present forced retreat from a life of abundance to a life of less can be a retreat into introspection as well. Once we have established a new rhythm, an empty agenda can be a blessing for creativity, for quality time in the family. And yes, why not blow the dust off from old-fashioned board games, as some of our friends have done?

We can take a step by reclaiming our right to be amazed by the wonders of creation, to 're-enchant the world', as Morris Berman says.⁵

Possibilities abound, as long as we have the wish to change. As people, and as a society, so we can become *homo spiritualis* or instead of *homo economicus*, spiritual beings instead of economic ones.

The previous economic crisis of 2008 was caused by greed and had little effect on our way of thinking. As soon as possible we hurried back to reclaim the old lifestyle.

⁵ See Bibliography.

This new crisis is of a completely different nature and is affecting our life styles beyond our purses and bank accounts. It is predicted that the economic aftermath will come later, especially if we want to return to the way things used to be.

The present situation however can also be an opening for new perspectives that tell us happiness is not related to material wealth, but is an inner feeling, triggered by a warm, satisfying or rewarding experience.

Over the past decade, many people have already opted for less work (and less income) in order to have more free time.

People offer experiences instead of material presents for birthdays, as slowly but surely more and more people understand that happiness is related more to a lovely experience than to material gifts. These are positive signs, as they show a change in attitude from linking happiness with 'things to have' towards seeing it as a psychological or even as a spiritual quality.

Openings like these can be a start to change, if not for the whole society, then at least for some individuals. As the saying goes, if you want to change the world, you have to start with yourself.

We hope that you, reading these lines, have found or will find your opening to trust that life has meaning and that you as an individual can add to that; that you have a goal to live for and are content with what you have. That you can trust that the universe provides, so there is no need to hoard or amass more material wealth than you ever may need. As Hazrat Ali, the son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, said, 'Everything with which one is content is sufficient.'⁶

Living thus, we can set moral and ethical values higher than financial ones and embark on a life with meaning for yourself and for the people around you. With these values we can work towards tolerance, understanding, and compassion for ourselves and for the people around us.

As we saw by diving into Sura al-Fatiha, this cry for a spiritual approach to life is of all ages. The Quran states the futility of the drive for material gain succinctly in Sura 103 (the Epoch), telling us that 'the human is always at a loss, except those who keep the faith, who work justice, who counsel one another to truth and counsel one another to patience.' We already came across this sura in the chapter on the road straight.

A few weeks before talking about piglets and bees, Hazrat Inayat Khan spoke to his Dutch audience from the piglet's perspective, calling materialism a curse and offering another comparison:

Life is like a pair of scales. The scale of the spiritual ideals of the past has now sunk deep, and the scale of materialism has reached its climax... People can only achieve results by rising above the material sphere. One must, of course, concern oneself with the material side of things, but also in a spiritual way. Only when spiritual ideas are decisive again, the world will become a better place...The financial worries of our time threaten to become a disaster for the peoples, a bankruptcy of the whole world... People blame it on the economic circumstances and

⁶ Cited in Thomas Cleary, p. 60.

find no strength to manage their fate. One has to struggle with oneself to rise above the ordinary level; only and then circumstances change.⁷

Much of the above can be read in Sura al-Fatiha, that centuries old Islamic prayer. Most of the topics discussed here were addressed, albeit not from the piglet's perspective, but from that of the bee, extracting the nectar from the flowers of Sura al-Fatiha to get a smell and a taste of positive openings for personal change that in the end may lead to cultural change. As Shaikh Ajmal Maharaj, caretaker of the Dargah (tomb) of Moineddin Chishti in Ajmir, India, said to us, 'religion is nothing but culture.'

Life isn't perfect. We always will make mistakes, even if we do our very best. But every step in the direction towards a life beyond a mere materialistic view, towards more unity, no matter how hesitatingly and awkwardly done, is a step that moves us forward. Here lies a big difference between the earthly and the spiritual approach. Earthly perfection is only perfect when the result is perfect, which by definition is impossible, as perfection lies outside the earthly realm. To confirm this, Persian carpet makers deliberately make at least one flaw in their design, as only God is perfect.

Spiritual perfection, too, is an unattainable goal, but here every step in the direction to hone and beautify our humanity is a path that shows results, even when the path is too long for almost any one of us to walk it to the end.

To strive for earthly perfection is product and result oriented, whereas spiritual perfection is a longing, a process.

The longing itself is already perfecting our humanity, yet in this longing too we are bound to make mistakes.

Let us therefore close this addendum with words from the Persian Sufi poet Shabistari (14th century). He writes in the epilogue of his *Secret Rose Garden*:

*Do not seek with cold eyes to find blemishes
or the roses will turn to thorns as you gaze.
Ingratitude is a sign of ignorance,
for those who know the truth are thankful.⁸*

⁷ Het Vaderland, January 21st, 1924. From the Nekbakht archives.

⁸ Mahmud Shabistari, p. 105.