

III. The Great Stream
(The Wisdom of Insecurity by Alan W. Watts)

We seem to be like flies caught in honey. Because life is sweet we do not want to give it up, and yet the more we become involved in it, the more we are trapped, limited, and frustrated. We love it and hate it at the same time. We fall in love with people and possessions only to be tortured by anxiety for them. The conflict is not only between ourselves and the surrounding universe; it is between ourselves and ourselves. For intractable nature is both around and within us. The exasperating "life" which is at once lovable and perishable, pleasant and painful, a blessing and a curse, is also the life of our own bodies.

It is as if we were divided into two parts. On the one hand there is the conscious "I," at once intrigued and baffled, the creature who is caught in the trap. On the other hand there is "me," and "me" is a part of nature – the wayward flesh with all its concurrently beautiful and frustrating limitations. "I" fancies itself as a reasonable fellow, and is forever criticizing "me" for its perversity – for having passions which get "I" into trouble, for being so easily subject to painful and irritating diseases, for having organs that wear out, and for having appetites which can never be satisfied – so designed that if you try to allay them finally and fully in one big "bust" you get sick.

Perhaps the most exasperating thing about "me," about nature and the universe, is that it will never "stay put." It is like a beautiful woman who will never be caught, and whose very flightiness is her charm. For the perishability and changefulness of the world is part and parcel of its liveliness and loveliness. This is why the poets are so often at their best when speaking of change, of "the transitoriness of the human life." The beauty of such poetry lies in something more than a note of nostalgia which brings a catch in the throat.

*Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind.*

There is more in this beauty than the succession of melodious images, and the theme of dissolution does not simply borrow its splendor from the things dissolved. The truth is rather that the images, though beautiful in themselves, come to life in the act of vanishing. The poet takes away their static solidity, and turns a beauty which would otherwise be only statuesque and architectural into music, which, no sooner than it is sounded, dies away. The towers, palaces and temples become vibrant, and break from the excess of life within them. To be passing is to live; to remain and continue is to die. "Unless a grain of corn fall into the ground and die, it remains alone. But if it dies, it brings forth much fruit."

For the poets have seen the truth that life, change, movement, and insecurity are so many names for the same thing. Here, if anywhere, truth is beauty, for movement and rhythm are of the essence of all things lovable. In sculpture, architecture, and painting the finished form stands still, but even so the eye finds pleasure in the form only when it contains

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a certain lack of symmetry, when, frozen in stone as it may be, it looks as if it were in the midst of motion.

Is it not, then, a strange inconsistency and an unnatural paradox that “I” resists change in “me” and in the surrounding universe? For change is not merely a force of destruction. Every form is really a pattern of movement, and every living thing is like the river, which, if it did not flow out, would never have been able to flow in. Life and death are not two opposed forces; they are simply two ways of looking at the same force, for the movement of change is as much the builder as the destroyer. The human body lives because it is a complex of motions, of circulation, respiration, and digestion. To resist change, to try to cling to life, is therefore like holding your breath: if you persist you kill yourself.

In thinking of ourselves as divided into “I” and “me,” we easily forget that consciousness also lives because it is moving. It is as much a part and product of the stream of change as the body and the whole natural world. If you look at it carefully, you will see that consciousness – the thing you call “I” – is really a stream of experiences, of sensations, thoughts, and feelings in constant motion. But because these experiences include memories, we have the impression that “I” is something solid and still, like a tablet upon which life is writing a record.

Yet the “tablet” moves with the writing finger as the river flows along with the ripples, so that memory is like a record written on water – a record, not of graven characters, but of waves stirred into motion by other waves which are called sensations and facts. The difference between “I” and “me” is largely an illusion of memory. In truth, “I” is of the same nature as “me.” It is part of our whole being, just as the head is part of the body. But if this is not realized, “I” and “me,” the head and the body, will feel at odds with each other. “I,” not understanding that it too is part of the stream of change, will try to make sense of the world and experience by attempting to fix it.

We shall then have a war between consciousness and nature, between the desire for permanence and the fact of flux. This war must be utterly futile and frustrating – a vicious circle – because it is a conflict between two parts of the same thing. It must lead thought and action into circles which go nowhere faster and faster. For when we fail to see that our life is change, we set ourselves against ourselves and become like Ouroboros, the misguided snake, who tries to eat his own tail. Ouroboros is the perennial symbol of all vicious circles, of every attempt to split our being asunder and make one part conquer the other.

Struggle as we may, “fixing” will never make sense out of change. The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.

Religion, as most of us have known it, has quite obviously tried to make sense out of life by fixation. It has tried to give this passing world a meaning by relating it to an unchanging God, and by seeing its goal and purpose as an immortal life in which the individual becomes one with the changeless nature of the deity. “Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine on them.” Likewise, it attempts to make sense out of the swirling movements of history by relating them to the fixed laws of God, “whose Word endureth for ever.”

We have thus made a problem for ourselves by confusing the intelligible with the fixed. We think that making sense out of life is impossible unless the flow of events can somehow be fitting into a framework of rigid forms. To be meaningful, life must be

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understandable in terms of fixed ideas and laws, and these in turn must correspond to unchanging and eternal realities behind the shifting scene¹. But if this is what “making sense out of life” means, we have set ourselves the impossible task of making fixity out of flux.

Before we can find out whether there is some better way of understanding our universe, we must see clearly how this confusion of “sense” with “fixity” has come about.

The root of the difficulty is that we have developed the power of thinking so rapidly and one-sidedly that we have forgotten the proper relation between thoughts and events, words and things. Conscious thinking has gone ahead and created its own world, and, when this is found to conflict with the real world, we have the sense of a profound discord between “I,” the conscious thinker, and nature. This one-sided development of man is not peculiar to intellectuals and “brainy” people, who are only extreme examples of a tendency which has affected our entire civilization.

What we have forgotten is that thoughts and words *are conventions*, and that it is fatal to take conventions too seriously. A convention is a social convenience, as, for example, money. Money gets rid of the inconveniences of barter. But it is absurd to take money too seriously, to confuse it with real wealth, because it will do you no good to eat it or wear it for clothing. Money is more or less static, for gold, silver, strong paper, or a bank balance can “stay put” for a long time. But real wealth, such as food, is perishable. Thus a community may possess all the gold in the world, but if it does not farm its crops it will starve.

In somewhat the same way, thoughts, ideas, and words are “coins” for real things. They are *not* those things, and though they represent them, there are many ways in which they do not correspond at all. As with money and wealth, so with thoughts and things: ideas and words are more or less fixed, whereas real things change.

It is easier to say “I” than to point to your own body, and to say “want” than to try and indicate a vague feeling in the mouth and stomach. It is more convenient to say “water” than to lead your friend to a well and make suitable motions. It is also convenient to agree to use the same words for the same things, and to keep these words unchanged, even though the things we are indicating are in constant motion.

In the beginning, the power of words must have seemed magical, and, indeed, the miracles which verbal thinking has wrought have justified the impression. What a marvel it must have been to get rid of the nuisances of sign-language and summon a friend simply by making that short noise – his name! It is no wonder that names have been considered uncanny manifestations of supernatural power, and that men have identified their names with their souls or used them to invoke spiritual forces. Indeed, the power of words has gone to man’s head in more than one way. To define has come to mean almost the same thing as to understand. More important still, words have enabled man to define himself – to label a certain part of his experience “I.”

This is, perhaps, the meaning of the ancient belief that the name is the soul. For to define is to isolate, to separate some complex of forms from the stream of life and say, “This is

¹ Later on in this book we shall see that these metaphysical ideas of the unchanging and the eternal can have another sense. They do not necessarily imply a static view of reality, and while ordinarily used as attempts to “fix the flux” they have not always been so.

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I.” When man can name and define himself, he feels that he has an identity. Thus he begins to feel, like the word, separate and static, as over the real, fluid world of nature.

Feeling separate, the sense of conflict between man, on the one hand, and nature, on the other, begins. Language and thought grapple with the conflict, and the magic which can summon a man by naming him is applied to the universe. Its powers are named, personalized, and invoked in mythology and religion. Natural processes are made intelligible, because all *regular* processes – such as the rotation of the stars and seasons – can be fitted to words and ascribed to the activity of the gods or God, the eternal Word. At a later time science employs the same process, studying every kind of regularity in the universe, naming, classifying, and making use of them in ways still more miraculous.

But because it is in the use and nature of words and thoughts to be fixed, definite, isolated, it is extremely hard to describe the most important characteristic of life – its movement and fluidity. Just as money does not represent the perishability and edibility of food, so words and thoughts do not represent the vitality of life. The relation between thought and movement is something like the difference between a real name running and a motion-picture film which shows the running as a series of “stills.”

We resort to the convention of stills whenever we want to describe or think about any moving body, such as a train, stating that at such-and-such times it is *at* such-and-such places. But this is not quite true. You can say that a train is at a particular point “now!” But it took you sometime to say “now!” and during that time, however short, the train was still moving. You can only say that the moving train actually *is* (i.e., stops) at a particular point for a particular moment if both are infinitely small. But infinitely small points and fixed moments are always imaginary points, being denizens of mathematical theory rather than the real world.

It is most convenient for scientific calculation to think of a movement as a series of very small jerks or stills. But confusion arises when the world described and measured by such conventions is identified with the world of experience. A series of stills does not, unless rapidly *moved* before our eyes, convey the essential vitality and beauty of movement. The definition, the description, leaves out the most important thing.

Useful as these conventions are for purposes of calculation, language, and logic, absurdities arise when we think that the kind of language we use or the kind of logic with which we reason can really define or explain the “physical” world. Part of man’s frustration is that he has become accustomed to expect language and thought to offer explanations which they cannot give. To want life to be “intelligible” in this sense is to want it to be something other than life. It is to prefer a motion-picture film to a real, running man. To feel that life is meaningless unless “I” can be permanent is like having fallen desperately in love with an inch.

Words and measures do not give life; they merely symbolize it. Thus all “explanations” of the universe couched in language are circular, and leave the most essential things unexplained and undefined. The dictionary itself is circular. It defines words in terms of other words. The dictionary comes a little closer to life when, alongside some word, it gives you a picture. But it will be noted that all dictionary pictures are attached to nouns rather than verbs. An illustration of the verb *to run* would have to be a series of stills like a comic strip, for words and static pictures can neither define nor explain a motion.

Even the nouns are conventions. You do not define this real, living “something” by associating it with the noise *man*. When we say, “This (pointing with the finger) is a man,”

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the thing to which we point is not *man*. To be clearer we should have said, "This is symbolized by the noise *man*." What, then, is *this*? We do not know. That is to say, we cannot define it in any fixed way, though, in another sense, we know it as our immediate experience – a flowing process without definable beginning or end. It is convention alone which persuades me that I am simply this body bounded by skin in space, and by birth and death in time.

Where do I begin and end in space? I have relations to the sun and air which are just as vital parts of my existence as my heart. The movement in which I am a pattern or convolution began incalculable ages before the (conventionally isolated) event called birth, and will continue long after the event called death. Only words and conventions can isolate us from the entirely undefinable something which is everything.

Now these are useful words, so long as we treat them as conventions and use them like the imaginary lines of latitude and longitude which are drawn upon maps, but are not actually found upon the face of the earth. But in practice we are all bewitched by words. We confuse them with the real world, and try to live in the real world as if it were the world of words. As a consequence, we are dismayed and dumbfounded when they do not fit. The more we try to live in the world of words, the more we feel isolated and alone, the more all the joy and liveliness of things is exchanged for mere certainty and security. On the other hand, the more we are forced to admit that we actually live in the real world, the more we feel ignorant, uncertain, and insecure about everything.

But there can be no sanity unless the difference between these two worlds is recognized. The scope and purposes of science are woefully misunderstood when the universe which it describes is confused with the universe in which man lives. Science is talking about a symbol of the real universe, and this symbol has much the same use as money. It is a convenient timesaver for making practical arrangements. But when money and wealth, reality and science are confused, the symbol becomes a burden.

Similarly, the universe described in formal, dogmatic religion is nothing more than a symbol of the real world, being likewise constructed out of verbal and conventional distinctions. To separate "this person" from the rest of the universe is to make a conventional separation. To want "this person" to be eternal is to want the words to be the reality, and to insist that a convention endure for ever and ever. We hunger for the perpetuity of something which never existed. Science has "destroyed" the religious symbol of the world because, when symbols are confused with reality, different ways of symbolizing reality will seem contradictory.

The scientific way of symbolizing the world is more suited to utilitarian purposes than the religious way, but this does not mean that it has any more "truth." Is it truer to classify rabbits according to their meat or according to their fur? It depends on what you want to do with them. The clash between science and religion has not shown that religion is false and science is true. It has shown that all systems of definition are relative to various purposes, and that none of them actually "grasp" reality. And because religion was being misused as a means for actually grasping and possessing the mystery of life, a certain measure of "debunking" was highly necessary.

But in the process of symbolizing the universe in this way or that for this purpose or that we seem to have lost the actual joy and meaning of life itself. All the various definitions

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of the universe have had ulterior motives, being concerned with the future rather than the present. Religion wants to assure the future beyond death, and science wants to assure it until death, and to postpone death. But tomorrow and plans for tomorrow can have no significance at all unless you are in full contact with the reality of the present, since it is in the present and *only* in the present that you live. There is no other reality than present reality, so that, even if one were to live for endless ages, to live for the future would be to miss the point everlastingly.

But it is just this reality of the present, this moving, vital *now* which eludes all the definitions and descriptions. Here is the mysterious real world which words and ideas can never pin down. Living always for the future, we are out of touch with this source and center of life, and as a result all the magic of naming and thinking has come to something of a temporary breakdown.

The miracles of technology cause use to life in a hectic, clockwork world that does violence to human biology, enabling us to do nothing but pursue the future faster and faster. Deliberate thought finds itself unable to control the upsurge of the beast in man – a beast more “beastly” than any creature of the world, maddened and exasperated by the pursuit of illusions. Specialization in verbiage, classification, and mechanized thinking has put man out of touch with many of the marvelous powers of “instinct” which govern his body. It has, furthermore, made him feel utterly separate from the universe and his own “me.” And thus when all the philosophy has dissolved in relativism, and can make fixed sense of the universe no longer, isolated “I” feels miserable insecure and panicky, finding the real world a flat contradiction of its whole being.

Of course there is nothing new in this predicament of discovering that ideas and words cannot plumb the ultimate mystery of life, that Reality or, if you will, God cannot be comprehended by the finite mind. The only novelty is that the predicament is now social rather than individual; it is widely felt, not confined to the few. Almost every spiritual tradition recognizes that a point comes when two things must happen: man must surrender his separate-feeling “I,” and must face the fact that he cannot know, that is, define the ultimate.

These traditions also recognize that beyond this point there lies a “vision of God” which cannot be put into words, and which is certainly something utterly different from perceiving a radiant gentleman on a golden throne, or a literal flash of blinding light. They also indicate that this vision is a restoration of something which we once had, and “lost” because we did not or could not appreciate it. This vision is, then, the unclouded awareness of this undefinable “something” which we call life, present reality, the great stream, the eternal now – an awareness without the sense of separation from it.

The moment I name it, it is no longer God; it is man, tree, green, black, red, soft, hard, long, short, atom, universe. One would readily agree with any theologian who deplores pantheism that these denizens of the world of verbiage and convention, these sundry “things” conceived as fixed and distinct entities, are not God. If you ask me to show you God, I will point to the sun, or a tree, or a worm. But if you say, “You mean, then, that God is the sun, the tree, the worm, and all other things?” – I shall have to say you have missed the point entirely.