

Essay

CENTERING: Beyond the Path of Polarity

Welcome to Planet Earth, 1990

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Two weeks ago, I underwent a crisis in consciousness, one in which I feel I narrowly averted locking into an old, insidiously destructive path. This path is familiar, like an old friend. I know the path intimately, how it begins, how it proceeds. Indeed, the groove of this path is so well worn, that had I stepped onto it again, I would have found it exceedingly difficult to remove myself before repeating the entire painful cycle exactly, yet one more time.

Many of us are on this path. Those who learn it well win the prizes. This particular path is so inextricably intertwined with the subtle underlying texture of western culture, so much a part of the motivating force which fuels behavior, that it is difficult to imagine ourselves operating without it.

This same path pervades all of life, from sibling rivalry to the educational system to business, to international politics. Though known by many names, and operating under many guises, the most common name for this path is “competition.”

We teach the path of competition from grammar school on, beginning with contests in spelling and other subjects, including sports. Here, though we give lip service to sportsmanship, fairness on the playing field, we all know what counts. What counts is to win.

In international politics, the path is now becoming known — and thank goodness, critiqued — as the “zero sum” game. Where, if one wins, the other one loses — and then feels bad, wants to get even, fans the flames of war. In our worst case scenario, the specter of MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) — 50,000? Or is it now “only” 30,000? — nuclear warheads aimed at each other across the globe has made its absurdist point. There is no “winning” a nuclear war.

Our growing understanding of the shadow side of competition in world military affairs has yet to filter down into daily life. The path of competition still prevails in just about every field of human activity in western culture. Think of our legal system, for example. Again, a zero-sum game. The most profound and glaring example of competition however is the western economic system. Capitalism is our sacred cow; it elevates the path of individual competition to a high and increasingly ruthless art.

In my own experience, I think of graduate schools of philosophy, and other rarified academic disciplines. Here, competition is standardized as the path of argument, debate. Seminar discussions, dissertations and colloquia are all contained within its well-known framework. The path of attack and counterattack. Or, if not proof of one’s own position, then at least disproof of the position of one’s opponent.

In academia, this path is not only taught, it is celebrated, justified as “objective,” “rational,” by those who like to think themselves objective and rational.

For those of us whose thinking is becoming more self-reflective or psychological, however, this same path could be called the path of “projection,” or “polarity.” It is a path we now wish to move beyond.

For this growing group of people, the phrase, “we create our own realities,” is the key which opens the door to the deeper meaning of our lives. We view experience symbolically, as the external expression — or projection — of inner beliefs and attitudes. We understand what happens on the outside at any one moment as the result, in the physical world, of the way we had previously imagined things to be.

We call this new — and most ancient — way of understanding the world “metaphysical,” i.e., beyond the physical. Abstract in conception, it is thoroughly

practical in application. To begin to live metaphysically is to effect a radical reversal of the way we understand cause and effect. Rather than being victims of “what happens to us,” we are its creators.

One corollary to this reversal is the idea that we are collectively responsible for the state of the world now. That if we wish to change the world, then we must begin, each of us, by changing ourselves — the ways we think and see and do.

Another corollary is the idea that there is no such thing as objectivity, and therefore no rationality as previously conceived. Instead, all positions are seen as points of view relative to persons, not objective but subjective.

Once we reach this metaphysical understanding of the path of polarity, something happens to us. We can no longer identify with our particular points of view in quite the same manner. Our former passionate intensity in defending our positions against their opposites begins to fade . . . But I get ahead of my story.

My own course down the path of polarity began in earnest when I was a graduate student, being coached by my mentor, a professor of philosophy. This man was Jewish, Israeli, intimate with the tragic history of persecution endured by his ancestors. He was deeply familiar with polarized situations, and, given his pugnacious temperament, also quite accomplished at setting one up where it did not exist before.

Naturally, my mentor always occupied the minority position within any polarity, played the role of the persecuted one, victimized, and yet courageous in the face of overwhelming odds.

But it wasn't just his temperament which led him into scrapes. It was also his unflinching need to see through to the heart of things. Both of these qualities in him fascinated me — initially terrified me, then drew me to him like a moth to the flame.

My mentor believed that, by and large, Truth is not valued by society, and that one who speaks truth automatically sets up a polarity against him or her, becomes like Cassandra, ostracized.

As a double Sagittarian, I had found my teacher. We both valued Truth, and he was to teach me how to both understand and work with the social consequences of telling it.

Quite naturally, my mentor taught me to play out the same role he did. Taught me that in order to speak the truth I must accept the personal attacks which, he assured me, were its inevitable result.

The first years of my training involved learning how to think and speak clearly. He had no patience with fuzzy or muddled or superficial minds, and to the extent that I brought such a mind to him, he was ruthless in forging it into an engine which could both make exacting distinctions and yet see in far-reaching ways.

He taught me to question all my assumptions, question them down to bedrock — and beyond. He taught me that, indeed, there is no natural end to this process, that all our “rational” thinking processes rest on nothing, on empty space. A self-styled “skeptical” philosopher, he taught me to realize that intellectual certainty, my goal since childhood, was chimerical, that those who think they can reach it are fools.

And yet, when I had finally chewed and assimilated the consequences of his teaching to the bone, when I had begun to speak and act as if I had truly embodied his skeptical philosophy, he shouted at me, accusing, shocked at my audacity: “You are a relativist!”

“Thank you,” I bowed and replied.

My mentor thought that he was damming me with these words. Instead, I felt congratulated. To him, “relativism,” meant “anything goes,” because nothing can be counted on. It is a view, he thought, which justified any sort of behavior, no matter how pernicious.

For me, to be a “relativist” is to recognize that there is no certainty in knowledge, just as my mentor had taught me. Unlike him, however, I looked — and found — a basis for ethical action in another realm altogether, the realm reached through “centering.” But again, I get ahead of my story . . .

Though my mentor understood that there was no way to rationally justify knowledge, his emotional response to the fact that I, his student, had become a living example of his conclusion, showed me that he still needed to justify knowledge — not rationally, but emotionally. Underneath his own debunked intellectual need for certainty was the deeper, instinctive emotional need for security, safety.

He was able to shift intellectually, but not emotionally. He could not embrace with his whole being the idea that, in truth, there is no truth to stand on, that wherever we are, we are nowhere — and that even this truth cannot be proved!

Though this man could not personally take the final step which his own philosophy entailed, he did teach me much about the sociology of his fellow academic philosophers, how they too were afraid, even more afraid than he; and being less willing to admit it, they were more likely to hate the one who made them feel so afraid.

Thus the path of polarity — and persecution.

He taught me that the actual index to the value of what I was saying was a function of how strongly it shocked others, polarizing them into two camps, pro and con. He taught me to say what I had to say so clearly and so powerfully, that people would either love it or hate it, come down on one side or the other, either for or against.

At the time, this learning was exactly what I needed to break out of the paralysis induced by my upbringing. I had been reared to be a shy, sensitive and very good girl, one who didn't make waves, who blended, as far as possible, into the prevailing winds. Now my mentor was teaching me to sail directly into the wind, to stand straight and tall in the face of hurricane forces.

In my birthchart, this entire situation, both during childhood and as a graduate student, is indicated by an unusually precise yod formation. First house Mercury/Venus in Capricorn inconjunct both sixth house Saturn in Gemini and eighth house Pluto in Leo, the latter two planets in sextile, all these aspects exact within one degree. In addition, Mercury and Saturn are in mutual reception, co-dispositors of the entire chart.

As a child, I was serious and dutiful, my native intelligence blocked. As a graduate student, this Saturnine influence mutated into a more Plutonian depth of approach, thanks to my mentor.

So, I was in good hands. Being taught by a Jew to remember my own persecution at the hands of others who wanted to shut me up. Being taught courage in the face of those who would have my head. Being taught to tell the truth anyway, no matter what the cost — and even though I couldn't prove it.

That was 21 years ago. I honor this man for his profound teaching. Truly, he saved my life, he ignited the life that was in me, the Sagittarian fire, and guided me to the recognition that there is no end to the search for truth; that no matter how far I go, the journey is endless. Not only endless, but I have discovered along the way, joyful, creative, inspired. Or it can be. It is, if I stay clear of the well-known groove mentioned above.

During this year, Uranus crosses my natal Venus/Mercury, triggering the yod. Old patterns of thinking shatter. As they break down, light shines through the cracks. I begin to quicken with the joy of continuous discovery.

And now, as of two weeks ago, I realize for the first time the origins of my own scapegoat mentality in the teachings of my mentor. I see now where it came from. Now that I see it, I can let it go. I want to learn to tell the truth in a way which does not invite attack, which is larger than this relatively narrow manner of communication.

Two weeks ago I almost started down that same old road again. In an essay I wrote, I first presented my own view, and then compared and contrasted it with the view of another. I set up a polarity with him. It felt so natural to do it this way. So real. So definitive and clear.

I was standing on one point, my "position," and looking across to another point, finger cocked like a child using her hand to mimic a pointing gun.

Luckily, with crucial help from a dear, dear friend, I caught myself in time to not make enemies. To not get caught up once again in that polarized place, that limited

space where I distract myself from presenting what I see. Instead of allowing my imagination to proceed further, I have gotten caught up along the way with defending my position in the face of real or imagined attack.

Psychologically, the mechanism seems to be the following: When I begin to attempt to describe the further reaches of what I see, at some point I grow afraid. Like my mentor, at some level I too still fear infinity, endlessness, continuously opening space.

In response to fear, my mind contracts, to a level at which it feels secure. First, I posit a point in space where I “take my stand.” From here, I look out and create (project) another point, at a certain near or far distance from the one upon which I am standing. And I then say, this is not that. This point is not that point. I define myself through what I am not. I am not like him. He becomes my “opposite.” I become not only intellectually, but emotionally involved in seeing myself “win” over him. One more zero-sum game.

This time, immediately prior to the whole sorry cycle beginning again, I caught myself preparing to do it and recognized where it would inevitably lead.

I create my own reality. In order to change that reality, I must first change my mind, by enlarging my vision. I want to begin to see the epistemological mechanism of projection and its hostile repercussions in behavior from a more mathematical or visual point of view.

Thinking visually, I can view my “opponent” as merely the other end point of a line which I have just created through positing a point across from my own.

This line, in turn, can be visualized as the diameter of a circle, the size of which is determined by the length of the line, by how near or far away I originally posited my “opponent” to be.

I have created a circle around myself, where formerly there was open space. I have created a circle and I am caught inside — without realizing it.

Whereas before I was afraid of openness, so now I am afraid of its opposite — claustrophobia! I seek a way out, want to break out, to punch my way through by destroying the point opposite the one upon which I still think I am standing.

In reality, I am no longer standing upon this point, which is now a point upon the circumference of the circle. Somehow, I have jumped to a point exactly halfway to the other side. I am standing in the middle of the circle now. I must be. Otherwise I wouldn't feel so enclosed, so surrounded on all sides by potential enemies . . .

So, resolution to this self-created conflict is first to visualize the initial polarity mathematically, as a line, which in turn becomes the diameter of a circle. The next step is to consciously realize that I have placed myself "squarely" in the center of that line, that circle.

As long as I stand in the center of the circle without awareness of being there, I feel surrounded, enclosed, claustrophobic, even paranoid. Once I recognize that I am standing precisely there, and that this circle is one I have created through the psychological mechanism of projection, my experience of the circle changes utterly.

Now I feel myself in the center, equidistant from all points on the circumference of this particular circle I have created to "orient" myself.

As the goal, in childhood, was intellectual certainty and emotional security, so now the goal of both head and heart is centering. As I center myself in the precise midpoint of my experience I find I am standing upon the very ground I was seeking all along.

Standing in the center, I sense the circumference of the circle I have created as a membrane, rather than a wall. It breathes, it moves, vibrating in resonance to the beat of my heart. Rather than being something I must break through to once again express my freedom, I can now rest within the circle, as one more form through which I both orient myself and direct energy.

For I sense my capacity to create an infinite number of concentric circles, both larger and smaller than this one. The circles radiate in all directions. The circles are frameworks or structures, paradigms within which I "make sense" of perception.

Each of these circles can be visualized as a globe or sphere or dimension of awareness. Each one contains an infinity of points, both upon its outer and inner skins,

and within the space which it encloses. Even in a limited space there are no limits.
Between any two points, there is always a third.

In order to bypass my old habit of limiting my perception by tying it down to work as merely one end point of a polarized point of view, I recognize myself as the center of a continuously expanding universe. This is the lesson, and the message, of the entire generation into which I was born: Pluto in Leo (1938-1958).

Each of us, as unique and singular individuals, stands centered, radiating outwards from the center of a universe that has no outer limits, no circumference. Each of us as the eye of our own storm, the still point of our own turning world. We are creative agents, attuning ourselves to and expressing ourselves through larger and larger spheres of awareness — forever.

We are all creators. We all breathe the same air. Our hearts beat to a universal biological rhythm, a rhythm entrained with other more subtle rhythms, all of them in concert as the universal harmony, the music of the spheres, the song of ourself. We are one. We are many. We are the one in the many. All polarities dissolve in the swelling sea of infinite space.