

TOWARD A NEW APPROACH TO IDENTITY

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It's been said that the issue of identity is the signature problem of the 21st Century. In fact, I think it's fairly obvious to anyone observing the human species, whether as an expert or just as someone regularly watching the evening news, that the identification with one group or another has been at the heart of many of our most serious conflicts. Whether it's religion or politics or economics or nationality or culture or gender or sexual orientation, almost all violence on our planet today can be traced back to an identification with a particular set of characteristics, beliefs or values leading to an attitude of "us against them".

From time to time we hear about efforts to eliminate or at least reduce such conflicts by seeking to build bridges between these identifications through one kind of negotiation or another. However, building bridges can never lead to lasting peace; at best it may lead to a truce. A truce can last a long time – sometimes even centuries – and perhaps we should accept that as good enough. But let's at least be clear about what we're doing.

I'm an American living in Germany and so I'm very aware of the current struggles with identity on two different continents. In the United States the struggle is often referred to as the tribalism of the "culture wars". For example: although the American Civil War ended over 150 years ago, the Confederate flag and statues of Confederate heroes keep showing up again and again (most recently in the confrontations in Charlottesville), suggesting that although the issue of secession may have been settled militarily and politically, it hasn't really been settled culturally at all. Apparently, the grievances associated with the North vs. South identities still simmer. And according to the American Psychological Association's 2017 "Stress in America" survey, more than half (59%) of those surveyed pointed to "current social divisiveness" as one of their biggest concerns. In other words, while there may have been a truce, there is no peace.

In the European Union there is an attempt to shift people's primary identity from their particular country or region to Europe as a whole. The nation states of Europe experienced so many destructive wars with one another, (the most destructive and horrifying of them being the two World Wars of the 20th Century, which are still alive in the collective memory), that the E.U. was conceived specifically as an effort to build permanent bridges between the states. The existence of the E.U. is predicated on the promise of peace and prosperity, and for a long time this noble project (begun with the European

Economic Community in the 1950's) seemed to be succeeding. But now, less than 70 years later, there are some major fissures emerging along the fault lines of national identity. Not only is the United Kingdom engaged in a Brexit, but also Scotland is currently quite serious about wanting to leave the U.K. And though Spain is currently safely embedded in the E.U., many in Catalonia are passionate about independence from Spain. Not to mention that the two parts of Belgium (Wallonia and Flanders) are so much at odds with each other that they not long ago went 19 months without being able to form a national government that both regions could agree on. And there are other divisions in Europe simmering as well.

This is not to say, of course, that the U.S. and the E.U. are each doomed to break apart. Rather, I point to the difficulties inherent in both of the unions in order to highlight the fact that the issue of identity may remain buried for quite a long time before once again erupting. Elsewhere in the world there are even more dramatic examples, which have led to genocide and ethnic cleansing. After decades and centuries of living together more or less harmoniously, Hutus and Tutsis (Rwanda), Serbs, Croats and Bosnians (the Balkans), Sunnis and Shiites (Middle East), Sinhalese and Tamils (Sri Lanka) and so many other conflicts in so many other parts of the world suddenly exploded into murderous violence. A truce rather than peace.

So, if building bridges is not the answer then what is? Rather than looking for new answers to an old question, let's ask a new question. Instead of seeking better and more sophisticated ways of negotiating the gulf between identities, let us explore the nature of identity itself in order to seek for clues to better dealing with its divisive nature. At the heart of identity is a distinction, which has hardened into a separation. Specifically, it is the delineation between inside and outside: inside my individual awareness vs. outside it, which eventually becomes inside my group vs. outside it. In other words, regardless of the particular level, whether it is individual, relationship, family, clan, organization, community or nation, a subjectivity is pitted against an objectivity – inside vs. outside.

The perception of this separation, like all perceptions, appears in the awareness of the observer. But understanding this seems to make no difference. This is because it is the contextual structure of our awareness itself and not just its content that has us trapped. The term we usually use to signify the structure of human awareness is the "mind". The content manifests itself as a stream of consciousness in the form of a story we tell ourselves about ourselves, about the world and about the relationship between the two. And because the mind functions as a survival mechanism, constantly on the look out for possible threats, every outside is perceived as a potential danger.

Not only does the mind shape how the world appears to us, it also has us believe in the reality of that appearance, including the appearance of the separation between inside and outside. On this side of the separation is the main character of the story we are telling ourselves. We call that character “me” and the name we give to all like-minded “me’s” is “us”. Once we identify with the main character we’ve identified with our own mind, and we do this so totally and so automatically that we don’t even know we’ve done it. In a way, one could say we’ve been kidnapped, held hostage and are now suffering from a severe case of Stockholm Syndrome.

It required thousands of years for humankind to explore our planet sufficiently to discover that it is round and not flat, despite our first naïve perception of it. Not too long after that we discovered that our planet isn’t a fixed point located at the center of the Universe as it first appeared to be. Most recently, by virtue of our longing to explore the vast reaches of outer space beyond our planet, the astronauts sent us back pictures of our world as a little blue marble hanging in the black expanse. And just as it required a vast expenditure of energy to overcome the force of gravity to be able to see ourselves from a new and larger point of view in outer space, so too will it require a vast expenditure of energy to break free of the gravitational pull of the belief that we are a fixed point – a “me” – in inner space.

The new question to ask ourselves might be: how do we humans break free of the gravitational pull of the identification with the mind? One possible answer comes from Jiddu Krishnamurti who claimed that insight could provide the necessary energy. The act of seeing the functioning of the mind, i.e. becoming aware of the nature of awareness, is sufficient to at least begin the process of breaking free. David Bohm, the renowned quantum physicist and Krishnamurti’s frequent dialogue partner, argued that the mind shapes our perception of reality as part of its survival function but, because it cannot perceive itself, it doesn’t know it’s doing that. As we become more conscious of the “story-ness” of our lives as well as the mechanical patterns of the character’s behavior, we are more able to view ourselves from beyond our usual orbit of perception.

But if I am not the character in the story, what and where am I? As long as I identify with my mind, I consider myself to be an object, because I see myself as an entity with a location. Scientists and philosophers have long searched for the location of “me” and never found it. They never found it because it isn’t there to be found, though it is there to be lived. I am not only an object; I am a space. I am not only in the world; the world is in me. I am both the character in the story and the field in which the story unfolds. I believe that only when we humans, in sufficient numbers, have broken free of our identification with the mind will peace be possible. Only then will we no longer need to build bridges,

because the perception of the gulf separating us from each other will be revealed to have been an illusion – one more in a long line of illusions ultimately exposed by humanity. In the meantime, however, let us build bridges where necessary, but let us not lose sight of the truth:

From this side of the river we seek a bridge to the other side. From the other side there is no river,

There never was

And there's no one trying to get across.