

Natural Inclusion

from adversity with love

by Dr Alan Rayner 5.5.2008

My struggle has been based in a simple longing to be included in the common space of natural human neighbourhood, from which my upbringing and education singled me out. I have needed to uncover a way of thinking that does not alienate reason from emotion, and does not disparage ordinary human qualities in the quest for exceptional performance. I wanted to discover the extraordinariness of the mundane and express this in a common sense and obvious way that isn't necessarily obvious to the highbrow, but is deeply embedded in our everyday experience of living, loving, fear and death.

From an early age, I was brought up with the expectation that I *ought* to be faultless, both morally and intellectually. Never mind that this was an unrealistic and ultimately meaningless aspiration for any human being, my duty as a genetically and culturally privileged child of the British Empire was to try as hard as I could to achieve it. The message was that my family and I would suffer greatly if I failed in this endeavour.

I would do this by becoming a scrupulously honest and dutiful paragon of virtue who always put others' interests and welfare before his own needs, whilst paradoxically being supremely competitive when it came to the kind of performance deemed important by those in my vicinity.

Spurred on by this pressure to excel and a need for my father's approval, I came through my early education with all the A and S Levels he could have wanted. They got me to King's College, Cambridge, where I studied for six years, gaining a triple first in Natural Sciences, followed by a PhD in fungal ecology. I soon moved to Bath University as a lecturer and at the young age of 35 was promoted directly to a Readership.

By the time I became President of the British Mycological Society at the age of 47, I had published six books and over 120 scientific papers. My academic colleagues, however, did not generally see this as good enough reason for further promotion or celebration. My research by then was producing findings that challenged orthodox schools of thought concerning the fundamental nature of evolutionary creativity and the legitimacy of scientific method and was therefore becoming neither publishable nor fundable through channels acceptable to the mainstream.

I felt unsupported and unvalued. Ever-present tensions and anxieties suddenly exploded to overwhelming proportions. Long-suppressed self-destructive and self-reclaiming processes took over my life. I had to take six months sick leave. Later I managed to return to work, but I was a changed man and an embarrassment to my colleagues. I set about radically changing the course of my teaching and research to include artistic and philosophical themes relevant to the global social, environmental and psychological crisis that I now saw as paramount.

I had never got over my childhood feeling that there was something fundamentally *wrong* with me, some *gap* in my make-up, which, when exposed, would prove both catastrophic and profoundly humiliating. My experiences of school and university education, with its many cruelties, iniquities, absurdities and pretences, did nothing to alleviate and much to

reinforce this feeling. I never felt more than temporary relief from my academic successes. They only served to cover up and delay recognition of my underlying deep inadequacy, until the next fearful test came along that could finally show me to be the dreadful fraud I really am. This sense of being a fraud also infected my personal life; loving and caring for others felt like a dangerous charade.

Yet at the same time I had the feeling of being possessed by an exceptionally inspiring, creative, knowledgeable, perceptive and empathic spirit, capable of seeing through the obstructions that everywhere block our human understanding and enjoyment of the flow of nature. This feeling would fill my heart with enormous enthusiasm and joy in sharing my experience and learning whenever I could just let go of my fears and not be painfully reminded of them.

My quest to understand and heal the seeming contradiction within myself began with the supposition, in line with much modern thinking, that my childhood perception was correct: there is indeed something fundamentally *wrong with* me. But I had great difficulty identifying what this something was.

Recently, my wife, Marion, brought home *The Achilles Syndrome - Overcoming the Secret Fear of Failure* by Petruska Clarkson. Reading it was a revelation. I had already vaguely heard about and related my experience to what has been called the Impostor Syndrome, but Clarkson's book goes further and deeper in identifying a psychological archetype, epitomized by the myth of Achilles. If ever a character combined exceptional prowess with exceptional vulnerability arising from a *gap* in his upbringing, here is the one. Moreover, this character was not only a great warrior (and worrier – like me, he would doubtless have been diagnosed these days as suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder), but he also expressed enormous creativity, compassion and healing power.

In identifying the origin of this syndrome, Clarkson had no hesitation in pointing to over-expectant forms of upbringing and education in a competitive culture, which neglect human needs for love and respect in the quest for fast-tracked superiority. The result is what she calls pseudocompetence - apparently advanced skill built on fragile foundations: in another word, bullshit.

Conventional rationalistic thinking regards individual behaviour as a definable product of internal brain structure and chemistry (genetic 'nature') and external environmental influences including education and upbringing ('nurture'). A hard line is drawn between inner world and outer world, notwithstanding that there is no modern scientific evidence for the existence of such discrete boundaries and much evidence to the contrary, implicit in relativity, quantum mechanics and non-linear theory.

I think it is just this kind of objective rationality, however, which creates the divisive cultural context in which the sense of vulnerability underlying Achilles Syndrome can grow out of all proportion. It makes this vulnerability seem like something wrong *with* individuals – a failing that needs to be surmounted, not a vital and inescapable source of human and evolutionary creativity.

Objective rationality also fails to appreciate how viewing vulnerability as a failing contributes to global crisis. It underlies the human propensity to try to remove doubt by imposing unrealistic definitions of things. We embed such definition deep within our

philosophical, mathematical, scientific, linguistic, educational and governmental foundations. We strive to be complete and perfect individuals who will be preserved (if not pickled!) in the Darwinian struggle for life, whilst not appreciating that any form of completion rings the death knell for evolutionary creativity. We render ourselves into discrete subjects and objects capable only of transactional, competitive or co-operative interaction rather than being lovingly receptive and responsive inclusions of one and another. We don't recognise that evolutionary perfection can only be a property of *all* in dynamic relationship, not *one* in isolation, and so try to live out our lives as paradoxical singularities, alienated from our natural neighbourhood.

But the gaps in our individual make up are *not* the problem. The *pretence* that these gaps can be eliminated or covered up is what makes us pseudocompetent. We cannot breathe or move or love or live without gaps in our bodily boundaries. These boundaries are necessarily *incomplete*, distinct and dynamic, not discrete and fixed. As William Wordsworth said, "in nature everything is distinct, yet nothing defined into absolute, independent singleness".

There is therefore very good intellectual reason for compassion. What we might deem, in a perfectionist framework, to be a flaw in human nature, our vulnerability and proneness to error, is actually vital. It is the source of our creative spirit. It is an aspect of our nature that enables us to love and feel love and so work co-creatively in dynamic relational neighbourhood, celebrating and respecting rather than decrying our diversity of competencies and appearances.

Correspondingly, my personal response through adversity has been to develop and explore a form of awareness called 'inclusionality'. This does not replace objective rationality but utterly transforms it into a far deeper and more encompassing appreciation of all form as *flow-form*, a dynamic inclusion, not an occupier of space.

With this awareness, seemingly opposing external forces are transformed into complementary influences within the limitless immanence of Natural Inclusion - the co-creative, fluid dynamic reconfiguration of all through all in receptive spatial context. The brutally local, 'to be *or* not to be' objective logic of the excluded middle is transformed into the fluid dynamic 'to be *in* not to be', 'somewhere as a dynamic inclusion of everywhere' logic of the included middle. The brutal, possessive sovereignty of the individual, 'I alone', self is transformed into the complex identity of self as neighbourhood with both local (particular) and non-local (everywhere) aspects. The brutal occupation and fractionation of territory is transformed into a *natural communion* of pooled togetherness. The brutal exploitation of other by one is transformed into sustainable attunement of one with other. The brutally imposed box of three-dimensional geometry - with space and time abstracted - is transformed into an infinite, dynamically nested, holeyness.

To view our human vulnerability as an Achilles Heal allows us to arrive at a naturally creative solution for adversity, a gap that opens the possibility of *agape* (spiritual love).