

Diversity and the Symphony of Human Hearts

Elan Leibner with Douglas Gerwin

Part 1: Aphorisms

I. How Love begat the world

In the innermost core of being lives Love, True Self.
True Self begat a Hierarchy of Beings.
In them It sparkles.
Those Beings spoke a world into existence.
In the world twinkle sparks of the Beings, but not of True Self,
Except
That world unfolds upwards toward Human Beings,
In whom IS a spark of True Self.
That spark, at the dimmed step downwards, is called the Higher Self.
Further still, it is the ego. Not Self, but a self, contracted and small.

Human beings have incarnated over and over, dimming the light of True Self,
Though occasionally brightening it, too.
The journey has led to the land of forgetfulness, Where True Self, and the Beings, and even the Higher Self
Are forgotten,
Or, at most, are found only in stories,
So we may return one day, of our own volition, Through self, to Higher Self, to Love.

II. Karma

Before returning to this created world,
Human beings veil the Higher Self with Karmic necessities:
The veils of
gender,
race,
ethnicity,
appearance,
disabilities,

All the things that aren't Self,
But attributes of self.

They grow up, and a choir of other selves chants at them:
You are *this* veil, and
That veil, and
This one, too,

And *his* veil has smothered you, and
Hers belittled you,

Or

Your veil is evil!
Bow down!
Apologize!
Repent!
Regret!
The other selves cannot be Selves because of YOU!

Wait.

What?

III. Interlude

"Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
Oh no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken.
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken."

(From Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare)

IV. The Work

The task of the teacher is to help the self awaken to Self,
Reach for True Self now and then.
See a child,
Love a child.
Seed in the child a knowledge of Self,
A yearning for Goodness, Beauty, Truth.
These are not mere social constructs;

They are the language of the gods.

If, in my veiled blindness, I missed the eyes of a child,
That's on me.
If, in our veiled blindness, we missed the eyes of children,
That's on us.

But we will not seed a Self
By relentlessly hectoring on veils and self,

Policing words,
Apportioning representation.

We will only confuse and obfuscate
And bind the ever-thicker veils to the self.

V. Love again

Sing me your song,
And I will open my heart to hear your Self,
Whispering between your words,
And help your self move sideways, modestly,
To make a little space.

Part 2: Narrative

For over a year now, we have been engaged as a society in an examination of deep-seated social inequities as we struggle to find ways to redress four and more centuries of injustice. This widespread debate about racism, diversity, equity, and the need to secure basic human rights for all constituents in our society is often couched in terms of the basic tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Intersectionality. These principles are deeply rooted in the philosophical soil of postmodernism, which also gave rise to other relatively recent disciplines such as Postcolonialism, Queer Theory, Gender Studies, and other forms of contemporary discourse.¹

In this essay we aim to introduce into this discussion a few anthroposophical ideas—two in particular—that offer another possible perspective in this debate. We

1. Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, for instance, describe the core tenets of these disciplines in their book *Cynical Theories (Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (USA: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020)). One does not have to endorse the authors' commentaries on these disciplines to appreciate the thoroughness of their research. As Pluckrose and Lindsay describe them, the twin approaches to the fundamental ailments of our time are characterized by a few signature principles:

- Personal narrative (or “lived experience”) outweighs data and evidence. Evidence can be debated, but personal experience of discrimination cannot.
- Interactions between people of different racial groups in society will *always* be manifestations of racism and power structures.
- Language is a tool of power and privilege. In consequence, universal truths are an illusion, since there can be no absolute good, truth, or beauty, for these are social constructs designed to perpetuate power and privilege.
- To the degree that equity, the share of ownership, has been denied marginalized people, justice for them entails forcing a reversal of this uneven equity. As Ibram X. Kendi says, “The only solution for past discrimination is present discrimination. The only solution for present discrimination is future discrimination.”
- People at the intersection of multiple discriminatory realities (for example, black, transgender, lesbian, and disabled) require special protections and privileges.
- Progress in remediating discrimination is to be measured in terms of equal outcomes: if people of color comprise 13% of the population, then 13% of wealth and power needs to be in their hands if this inequity is to be righted. Similar percentages must be achieved in every place where competition is present (school admissions, executive suites, cultural institutions, etc.).

suggest these ideas as a way of broadening the terms of the discussion to include elements otherwise omitted or simply denied a voice. Further, they may serve as fertile soil and grounding for healthy human interactions, including relationships between historically marginalized populations and those socially dominant groups of European origin.

First Idea: The Evolution of Consciousness

Human beings have incarnated over and over,
dimming the light of True Self,
Though occasionally brightening it, too.
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Through self, to Higher Self, to Love.

The Evolution of Consciousness is Rudolf Steiner's description of a journey that humanity has undertaken since the very beginning of cosmic existence. In the last few thousand years, it has assumed a more perceptible form and consists, broadly, in the gradual loss of our connection to our spiritual origins in order to gain freedom of thought and mastery of the material world.

During the course of this journey, which is far from ended, different groups within humanity take on a sort of “public service assignment,” losing spiritual capacities and gaining individual consciousness and material mastery sooner or more intensively than other groups. It is crucial to understand that this description does *not* mean there are better or superior peoples, for two reasons: First, we incarnate again and again, so each one of us has been born into multiple and different ethnic groups. We may gain experience, wisdom, and karmic debts along the way but no inherent value by dint of birth into this or that group. The second reason is that the ultimate goal of this journey is the development, in freedom, of love in its spiritual aspect. There is no possible way to ascribe collective advantages to any one group in its striving towards this goal. Love is a free deed accomplished individually; no position of power or position of weakness precludes or guarantees the unfolding of spiritual capacities.

Since humanity has been journeying from epoch to epoch and changing its consciousness along the way, it is natural that conceptions of reality change over time. We have a dim sense of this, for example, in that the vast majority of people today who worship in Christian, Jewish, or Muslim congregations read and teach their children about miracles. And yet those same parents

would probably seek psychological advice if their child had ever claimed to have wrestled with an angel. In past centuries, miracles were accepted as something involving the intervention of divine beings, but this idea is no longer widely accepted, at least not in the same way. Another example: scientists admire Isaac Newton, but conveniently ignore the fact that he spent substantially more time on the mysteries of alchemy than on the empirical study of physics. From their point of view, Newton was still partially “trapped” in an age of ignorance and superstition, or he simply slipped back into it during the dotage of old age. Our point is not whether these scientists are right or wrong about Newton, but rather that they are implicitly acknowledging that his consciousness was different from their own. A further and related example from scientific study: what today we count as legitimate evidence (repeatability of an empirical experiment, for instance) would have been regarded as recently as medieval times as irrelevant to the pursuit of scientific knowledge. By the same token, what in medieval times would have counted as evidence or legitimate explanation—for instance, the presence of divine intervention in natural events—would today be treated as merely random chance or coincidence.

In other words, the same phenomenon in nature, seen by an Indian sage, an Egyptian pharaoh, a Medieval scholar, and a contemporary Nobel laureate scientist can be understood in completely different ways. Over long periods of time, the gaze of humanity has descended: from an upward gaze accompanied by the dismissal of the material as “maya” in ancient times to the gaze into the microscope and concomitant dismissal of the spiritual as being mere superstition. This shift in our consciousness has yielded a certain mastery over the material world and the freedom to think independently, but at the price of a lost connection to our spiritual origins. In societies such as the Nayaka in India or the Mbuti in Africa, we see people who still have a direct and matter-of-course connection with the spirit. Whereas a European of old may have labeled them “primitive,” we can appreciate that, in their relationship to the spirit, they are much healthier as a society than we are. The challenge of modern humanity is to integrate our empirically acquired knowledge with the wisdom that still lives among those who haven’t lost the spirit and to ensure that the benefits of this integration are available to all. A sizeable challenge, to be sure, but worth the striving.

Just as a choir needs the full harmony of voices even if not all are equally strong, so each of our societal “songs” can have its own soprano, its own bass, its own alto, tenor, and other voices.

If one allows that every human being cycles through the constellations of the cosmos, so to speak, learning to see and understand the world through successive incarnations and successive perspectives, then truth-seeking and meaning-making assume a new context: One’s own perspective can be valid without excluding others’. To be sure, it is not therefore the case that all perspectives have equal merit. One can still be wrong, and the weight of evidence still matters. But just as a choir needs the full harmony of voices even if not all are equally strong, so each of our societal “songs” can have its own soprano, its own bass, its own alto, tenor, and other voices. Different songs will call out different leading voices. We need to recognize when our voice is required to carry a leading melody or cadence, when our contribution is to provide supporting harmonies, or even, heaven forbid, when our voice needs to keep quiet for a few bars.

In a society that desires this kind of polyphonic structure, we *converse* as a way to discover more truth, and we *partner* in an attempt to do more good. A conversation, as opposed to an argument, can yield new insights and understanding, and the mere engagement with another person is proof that we assume this to be possible. Similarly, partnership is a way to multiply our collective strength. Both a true conversation and a real partnership work as generators of completely new possibilities: they are not mere sums of two preexisting opinions or capacities, but incubators of genuine new beginnings. In that, they reach for the truly human: the creative potential harnessed for the good of all.

To be sure, there are legitimate differences within the voices of the liberal democratic project as a whole: those who call themselves “political liberals” will tend to favor the underdogs, seek to legislate in their favor, and include more government intervention in economic life through higher taxation and redistribution of wealth; those who name themselves “political conservatives” will favor the existing order, prefer a small and limited government, seek slow, gradual change, and prefer to focus on traditional institutions of society (family, congregation) over government programs. Though they debate fiercely, there has been basic agreement among these groups, at least historically, that they can and should coexist. Democratic societies, the quintessential manifestation of this liberal project, are possible only because citizens accept that the winning party can lead

their country even if the one they personally support has lost an election.

By their own statements, postmodernist thinkers (such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault) and their philosophical offshoots, such as adherents of Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality, have lost faith in this project altogether. For them the ideals and principles of this outlook are simply social constructs that serve as power structures of a ruling elite. The activism that grew out of their work challenges the standard logic of formed discourse—hypotheses supported by evidence—since these are taken to be tools of oppression. Hence air horns can be used to drown out public lectures of opponents on college campuses, for example. From their viewpoint, to engage with those of opposing views is a fruitless exercise since it entails negotiating with oppressors (or their Uncle Toms) on their oppressive terms.

Second Idea: Karma

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Human beings veil Higher Self with Karmic necessities:

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All the things that aren't Self,
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They grow up, and a choir of other selves chants at them:

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That veil, and
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Or

Your veil is evil!
Bow down!
Apologize!
Repent!
Regret!
The other selves cannot be Selves because of YOU!

Wait.

What?

Karma is the familiar concept of meeting in this life the consequences of past lives. In its anthroposophical

context, karma is understood to be not some kind of cosmic punishment, but rather the lawful way in which the human spirit takes on a particular set of circumstances, primarily chosen for the physical instrument provided, that will allow it to make its desired progress by meeting (and, it is hoped, overcoming) necessary obstacles. Those obstacles can consist of relationships with individuals, with one's own body (as in the case of a disability), with society, or indeed with other groups of people. As an individual, one tries to find the most suitable physical configuration (physical body) with which to resolve past difficulties and take up the resulting challenges out of one's own yearning to grow closer to the better angels of one's nature.

Speculating about karma is an odious and fruitless pursuit. For the most part, we simply don't know why other people are born into their circumstances. We can rest assured, though, that however miserable, disenfranchised, or privileged we seem to be from without, our karma has blessed us and challenged us in ways that others will never fully comprehend. What seems so awful from outside may not feel that way seen from within, and what seems like a cosmic winning lottery ticket may not be so great from the perspective of the supposedly lucky winner. Be that as it may, the default mode of most modern people is that our cup of sorrows is always full. We experience criticism far more acutely than praise; illness far more acutely than health; what we crave far more acutely than what we already have. It is easier to be empathetic towards misery than towards success, for the latter begets jealousy much more easily than empathy. "Every time a friend succeeds, I die a little," in the words of Gore Vidal.

We come into the world bearing with us our individual and collective spiritual heritage, or what in our aphoristic opening poem is called "veils"; these veils are not our essential Self. We have to embrace them, but only so that we can let them go. Everything about our appearance and physical instrument is a series of veils, and, like a veil painting, one overlaps another, at once deepening the colors and obscuring the light. Our individual and collective challenge is to see through the veils, our own and others'. This seeing is not a seeing with the eyes, of course, but a seeing with the heart. Every time we fixate on the veil-ness of others, we weaken the ability to see them through the heart. It isn't that the veils are unimportant, for they serve as a challenge to be overcome, but they can be transcended only when we see the individual, the Self, through them.

A spiritually-based approach to karmic circumstances will not deny or ignore or dismiss the veils of gender, race, etc., but neither will it fixate on them. What matters is the persons' gifts and challenges rather than the

veils they wear. Individual agency is more important than group identity. Every time we see ourselves and our fellow human beings clearly, veil-less-ly, in their Self-identity, we accomplish a spiritual deed; every time we see ourselves or another person as primarily a veil identity, we remain blind to Self and bound to self.

Martin Luther King, Jr., exhorted us to see his children for the “content of their character rather than the color of their skin.” This is how we will “hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope” and “transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.”

A Spiritually-Based Approach to Diversity in Waldorf Education

The Work

The task of the teacher is to help the self awaken to Self,
Reach for True Self now and then.
See a child,
Love a child.
Seed in the child a knowledge of Self,
A yearning for Goodness, Beauty, Truth.
These are not mere social constructs;
They are the language of the gods.

If, in my veiled blindness, I missed the eyes of a child,
That’s on me.
If, in our veiled blindness, we missed the eyes of children,
That’s on us.

But we will not seed a Self
By relentlessly hectoring on veils and self,
Policing words,
Apportioning representation.

We will only confuse and obfuscate
And bind the ever-thicker veils to the self.

There are two somewhat distinct yet related aspects to the question of diversity in Waldorf education, one having to do with children, the other with adult colleagues:

- The first and most important aspect is pedagogical one: How do we educate children of diverse backgrounds and varying personal circumstances in such a way that the Core Principles of Waldorf Education are enacted in relevant, authentic, and meaningful experiences for them?
- The second aspect has to do with adult relationships within a school community: How do we foster a work environment and a community spirit in

which people’s talents and interests are given room to flourish, regardless of their background, and at the same time allow for a healthy culture of debate and disagreement?

The gesture of our age, the age of the consciousness soul (inasmuch as it relates to interpersonal relationships), is one that we have previously characterized as *empathy*.² This compassionate gesture is thoroughly appropriate when meeting another person’s veils. When we state that our ultimate goal is overcoming veil identity, we do not thereby ignore or diminish the fact that being seen (and treated) solely according to an identity determined by gender, race, ethnicity, or disability has been the cause of immense suffering for those whose identity incorporates these veils. In pointing to the essential spiritual humanity of every person, the reality of discrimination on the basis of veils is in no way denied. Our goal must be to transcend veils altogether while still recognizing the harm caused by seeing and treating persons solely in accordance with their perceived veils.

Pedagogical Considerations

When the Pedagogical Section Council of North America (PSC) drafted—then periodically revised—its “Core Principles of Waldorf Education” document, it deliberately left out any specific educational content. The only indications relative to the content of the curriculum are that it should be age-appropriate and taught using sound methodological principles. This omission was completely intentional and points to the need to make the content relevant, authentic, and meaningful to the students.

In recent conversations, Waldorf alumni of color have reported to us that they did not see themselves reflected in the curriculum and in the schools they attended: there were no heroes and heroines of color, and the faculty was mostly of European descent. The former observation, especially, raises an urgent criticism of the Waldorf curriculum and must be remedied, for in some of our practices, as opposed to our principles, we have been blind as a school movement to perspectives other than a traditional European one. The latter observation may prove to be of less central concern: a child needs good teachers, not necessarily teachers who look like the child. Part of growing up and getting initiated into society (which is one of the roles of school) is meeting role models. Teachers, whether they like it or not, model being a human being. It is a necessary aspect of being a good educator that one

² Elan Leibner, “Between Our Demons and Our Gods,” *Research Bulletin* XXII-2.

pays attention to the background and circumstances of one's students, and, to the extent that the students' veils are different from one's own, finds in told narratives, books, and art, examples of people with whom the students may find it easier to identify. The Nigerian storyteller Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in a poignant TED talk on "The Danger of a Single Story," offers a vivid perspective on the importance of finding multiple narratives for children.

Regardless of the personal veils a teacher wears, one can still develop a comprehensive cultural narrative. The essential point is to find two types of materials:

1. Those that every student, regardless of background, should learn.
2. Those that a specific class should learn.

Regarding the first type: Students grow up in a particular place and time, and they need to be equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills to function autonomously in these environments as adults. Some content is crucial, and a youngster cannot be considered well educated who has not encountered this content. This includes learning about important yet utterly objectionable characters as well as learning about people whose opinions or actions may not accord with all present standards of righteousness. In fact, in a figure such as Thomas Jefferson we have ample opportunity to appreciate human complexity. In our own classes, we have studied fundamentally different historical characters such as Adolf Hitler, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King. How the material is actually presented will determine the pedagogical value of the lesson.

It is very worrisome to us if broad swaths of classic literature, for example, are stricken from the curriculum. Classic texts from Homer to Shakespeare to Twain and even Dr. Seuss have been eliminated in schools for failing to abide by contemporary values or terminology. An education devoid of certain classics limits students in innumerable ways, not least by leaving them ignorant of the banned material and the ways in which it still resonates within their culture. Why would we be so afraid to read demanding and even problematic texts with students? In Elan's high school in Israel, for instance, students read *The Merchant of Venice*. Aside from the literary value of the work, it gave students the occasion to discuss historical and contemporary European anti-Semitism. No one had to be sent to a safe space because the Jew is presented unflatteringly in Shakespeare's play.

In the second type, the door opens wide for each teacher to consider what the specific students in the class need to hear, read, sing, and/or do. There are literally endless possibilities for using festivals and blocks (such as geography and science) to bring a wide range of biographies, artistic work, crafts, and research projects so that all students can engage with what they need, both individually and collectively: women scientists, gay and lesbian poets and authors, Michaelic figures in the Civil Rights movement, great figures in the kingdoms of Western Africa prior to the transatlantic slave trade – and so forth.

There is a further pedagogical aspect to the "how" of teaching. Different children need different approaches to learning. In this regard, diversity is both everything (when considered in the sense of human individuality) and, paradoxical as it may sound, less significant a factor as far as the teacher is concerned (when considered tribally). It is the teacher's task to reach every student and to sense what every student needs. In this sense, it is too simplistic to say that marginalized communities produce different kinds of people. As a teacher, one has to figure out how to help all students reach their individual potential. Some students need mild encouragement, some need to be challenged competitively, some need an intellectual stimulation, some humor, and some need artistic entryways before they can relate to abstractions. There is nothing, as far as we know, that makes individuals of any minority background different in this fundamental sense. Look at the student; try to see the student; love the student; now teach.

Adult Relationships

Working with adult relationships, in the context of diversity as in life generally, can be more challenging than working with students. The most difficult aspect of school life when it is subjected to hyper-vigilant surveillance of one adult by another is that one either feels left

out of the inner circle, excluded from the centers of decision-making because of some veil quality, or fearful that one's every word will be measured against some yardstick of potential offensiveness. The inability to develop trust in collegial relationships is the sad consequence of this kind of surveillance, a trust that can otherwise grow among colleagues who hold a basic faith in the goodness of one another and a sense that they are on a common journey. When one has to be on guard all the time lest one say, do, or even somehow cause someone to imagine that one may have said or done

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something wrong or offensive, so much energy is spent remaining vigilant that trust grows very slowly – if at all.

In addition to the two key anthroposophical notions— evolution of consciousness and the rules of karma— discussed earlier, there are two additional concepts out of anthroposophy that may serve to build a healthy imagination of collegial work. The first is the idea of the *threefold*. We have written about it at length elsewhere³. For our purpose here, the key idea is that in the third space between two polarities, an altogether new quality can arise. This isn't merely a middle area, like some grey tone between black and white, but rather a new dimension of being, as in the Goethean rainbow arising between light and darkness.

Conversation and partnership can be experienced as examples of this idea. In conversation, a mode of discourse different from argument or even debate, *both* sides seek to see more light, find more truth, move beyond the “two-ness” of their starting points in search of new insight that transcends their own positions. If we could learn to have conversations, rather than stake positions and demand adherence to a single point of view, the common journey will build the intimate trust mentioned earlier. A great example of such conversations is offered in the deep friendship between the late Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. They could not have been farther apart in their jurisprudence, and yet they grew to admire and respect each other as kindred seekers of the deepest levels of meaning and ethics. Partnerships, rather than allyships,⁴ build strength for action similar to the way that a conversation builds wisdom: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

How about we set ourselves a task *not* to see Racism and Anti-Racism, for example, as the only options, but seek instead individual and collective encounters that unite us around a common goal of activating love as a potential and a force within our communities?

Can you see me with your heart?

Can I see you through mine?

Racial color blindness and disability blindness are impossible at the physical or material level—indeed they are a sign of mindless unconsciousness—and yet

they constitute the ultimate goal of a truly human circle. If we accept that the human being is at its core a spiritual being, we need to practice seeing in that way — in other words, practice seeing with the heart: artistically, compassionately, warmly.

The second potentially helpful concept is the *twelve points of view*. Rudolf Steiner suggests that every ques-

tion can be viewed from twelve different perspectives, as though from the twelve signs of the zodiac. Rather than engaging in inflammatory language that sets one group against another, we may make more progress in speaking of “the missing voices in the choir.” If we are, as Martin Luther King dreamed all those years ago, to transform our discord into a beautiful symphony of human camaraderie, it is incumbent upon us to let every honest voice find its place in the choir. This is the task of both those inclined to muz-

zle the voice of the marginalized, and for the activists who would airhorn the voices they perceive to be privileged. Suppression of song, from whatever side, does not a symphony make.

As teachers in various schools and institutes, we have had the privilege of working in a few circles of human beings that became true vessels of spirit light. Not every voice carried the same weight in them, but every voice carried the appropriate weight at the right moment; it is the (momentarily relevant) competence that should guide the relative value of a contribution. Sometimes being quiet and attentive is the most active and positive contribution one can make, and sometimes it is the courage to oppose a convincing but misguided perspective. In a spiritual circle, everything is born anew at each moment; everything old (such as a covering of veils) is momentarily set aside. If each one of us enters the conversation with the image of bringing, at most, two or three perspectives of the needed twelve, we will know when to be quiet, and also when to speak.

Love again.

Sing me your song,

And I will open my heart to hear your Self,

Whispering between your words,

And help your self move sideways, modestly,

To make a little space.

An opened heart ready to resound with fellow seekers does not fear discord. Just as a muscle grows in the presence of resistance, insights expand through conversation, meditation, partnership, and a return to conversation. The difference between a symphony

3 Elan Leibner, “The New Impulse of the Second Teachers’ Meditation,” *Research Bulletin* XIX-1.

4 This is a fairly new term coined in sociology for certain kinds of diversity training in which dominant groups take on the unconditional support of marginalized groups.

of professional musicians performing in a concert hall and a symphony of human hearts is that the latter play without a prepared score – and, typically, without rehearsal. Let us make music, then, as the angels have never yet heard.

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