

HOW CAN WE FIND / REACH / ARRIVE AT LOVE?

An interview with Claudio Naranjo - 1983

By Delia Vergara

EVIL

You say that there have been many revolutions and experiments in the world but that we humans are still empty, dysfunctional, and even dangerous. What are we lacking?

It is true, we have a long history of noble proposals and many revolutions for social change. Nevertheless, these have never included a proposal for individual change. It seems that the time has come to understand that if we want a different society we need more complete human beings. One cannot construct a building of this nature without the proper materials.

What would you say is the problem of the individual?

The origin of the problem is emotional. We feel empty, useless, meaningless. We lack internal harmony. Most people are ruled by this emptiness; they devour their surroundings, consume, try to fill themselves up with the lives of others, puff themselves up with importance, power.

Why have we become used to living like this without seeing it as abnormal?

Because we are suffering from a condition that in theology is called "hardness of heart." The sinner does not know that he or she is sinning; their hearts are hardened.

How would you describe this internal malaise? What are its components?

My mentor, Tótila Albert (the Chilean poet and sculptor who died at the end of the 1950s), saw it as an internal imbalance between the paternal, maternal, and child energies. Inside the psyche the father principle takes over the authority and enslaves the others. On the other hand, psychology, from Freud on, talks about the mind taking over from the emotions and the instincts.

Do you believe that our illness has something to do with the patriarchal system?

Time and experience have confirmed for me that our illness is the patriarchal system. We have advanced in technological terms, but at the same time we have deteriorated in psycho-spiritual terms. Tótila's originality is that he pointed to this as an internal as well as social illness. He defined the crisis as a relational illness, one that resides inside us, among the paternal, maternal, child aspects of our selves.

How is this manifested?

That each individual lives in the head, from the superego, from the tyranny of the "should." This is what ordinary morality is about: obedience to the internalized father. Human beings carry within them a master and a slave. The slave is spontaneous, instinctive natural, the maternal and child elements.

How does this affect me and my feelings?

We are born into a world of tyrants in which those who love us are also the ones who most make us suffer. Our parents, without knowing that they are hurting us, take over control and authority, ignorant of the child's capacity for self-control, with very little faith in the child's internal nature. The attitude is: "I love you and accept you if you do things in such and such a way." This is how we perpetuate this culture that little by little is consuming nature and has developed enough weapons to destroy the planet many times over.

ACHIEVING / FINDING LOVE

What are your reasons for optimism in the face of this picture you paint?

There is now more consciousness than ever before of the root of suffering, that it is the suffering of not-being, the sensation of meaninglessness. People arrive at therapists' offices in droves saying: "I'm not doing well, this isn't working." In psychotherapy it is said that one element of a good prognosis is consciousness of the illness. On the other hand, although there have always been people who evolve, in this past century there evolved something we could call a methodology of love, which is psychology's contribution. Before the arrival of psychological knowledge, it was as if a piece were missing, a resource needed for this business of change. The mere commandment to love others has not worked; a therapeutic method to achieve it is needed.

What has psychotherapy brought that is new?

Instruments to know oneself, to heal the emotional wounds and liberate the instinct. In other words, one can liberate the maternal and child elements in people, and in this way achieve more harmony. The human being is more complete when he or she can allow the internal elements to embrace each other rather than grow weaker by fighting among themselves.

All that about liberating the instinct seems almost sinful in the world we live in.

I have more faith in instinct than in our current civilization. Free human instinct self-regulates. A healthy person recovers their spirituality that rises out of the interior animal. They recover, for example, their sexuality that is very damaged in most people despite a kind of superficial sexual freedom, one that I see not as freedom, but rather a counter-repression to the repression. There is nothing healthy about that.

What can one gain by knowing oneself?

As one gets to know one's false self, the true self begins to appear, one that is living naturally. It is important to know what one is experiencing, be conscious of what one feels. It is healing to become aware of unconscious aggression, unconscious pain, unconscious fear. To heal hatred—a widespread plague inseparable from hyper-desire, greed, the neurotic need for more—it is necessary to sincerely express these feelings. One cannot heal what one cannot express.

This sounds a bit like confession for Christians?

Yes, because it proposes an intimate space to confess one's own destructive, negative emotionality. One must see all of it in order to say, enough, I'm going to take a new path, a loving path. Love goes way beyond those feelings that have been idealized as love. Passions have been idealized as love, falling in love has been idealized as love, but true love is a very undramatic thing. It is an attitude of not causing harm to others, a fraternal feeling.

In addition to psychotherapy, you recommend meditation as a complement.

Meditation, in the broadest sense of the word, is a way of connecting with spirituality. It is a tool to experience the divine. Spiritual teachings from different cultures tell us that only when the mind is quiet can it reflect something that is beyond itself. If we quiet our own small voices we can hear a voice on another level that will lead us to the correct path.

EDUCATING THE EMOTIONS

Lately you've said that you are very inspired by the issue of education. Why?

Because it is time for us to have an educational system for human development. We now have predominantly intellectual education in which all other aspects of the human being are undervalued. There is nothing we need as much as emotional education that educates our ability to love that is the

basis of good social and familial cohabitation. If we do not achieve a higher level of goodness, all our technology will take us nowhere.

What makes you think this is possible?

It is difficult because the educational system would have to overcome its taboos against the therapeutic and the spiritual. But this does not make it any less urgent. Education could include spiritual instruction that is not dogmatic, concrete practices that help cultivate the deep mind, and a process of guided self-knowledge that will lead not only to changes in the behavior of young people, but also to that deeper transformation that is the essence of human maturity.

But there already exists something like values education.

That isn't enough. That combination of instruction and sermonizing they call values education is not enough to embody values. More profound processes, like the ones we've discussed, are necessary. Teachers would have to go through these processes as part of their own training in order to be able to guide the young.

Do you have any concrete proposals in the field of education?

Through my work of training therapists, I have perfected a very powerful program for human development that could fill this gap in the training of teachers. It can be developed in three consecutive annual modules. And it could be called "a mill to grind down egos" for it is inspired in the vision of the spiritual path as an awakening, through the consciousness of the ego, to the consciousness of being, and it is carried out in a guided group process. The most important thing I can contribute is the news that this is possible to do in a relatively brief and economical way.

YOUR OWN TRANSFORMATION

What would you say to somebody who wishes to embark on the path you propose?

That internal change is work, it is a discipline. One must work to attain spiritual progress. Effort has a lot to do with being willing to suffer, to look at what is painful, what is twisted. After that stage, the therapeutic stage, comes something like a rebirth. The truth about oneself is born, and this self knows how to live.

Describe how that process was for you.

My search began with experiences I had as an adolescent in which I felt a level of unknown happiness, but they were transitory, I lost them. The fact that I lost them left me conscious that there was something to look for, a state that was very superior to the ordinary happiness that I had experienced before. During the whole time I lived in Chile this search was my main occupation; nevertheless it was something that I only wrote about in very private notebooks; I kept it totally secret. I felt like an odd fish. Only when I came to work at the University of California in Berkeley at the beginning of the 1960s did I feel like I was in some kind of oasis, because I found myself surrounded by other similar seekers, by a new generation that was freeing itself from the authority of its elders.

What were these people questioning?

The division of human thought into a multitude of schools, religions, and tendencies that fought among themselves. This was seen as a result of the authoritarianism within each of those systems, that way of saying: "Look, here is the whole truth."

So how did the others see things?

They thought that all these visions were complementary, all part of the same pie. This made a lot of sense to me. I was one of the first founders of Esalen, a center for growth that brought together therapeutic pursuits with the spiritual, the artistic, and the corporal in an attitude of integration that later spread throughout the world.

Did you go through all the trainings?

At Esalen there were extraordinary people and naturally I took advantage of that. I had a certain kind of invulnerability to pain, and as a result, to love. I had a kind of interior drought.

Who really influenced you?

One of the most important people I met was with the creator of Gestalt therapy, Fritz Perls. He was a great teacher and a man who achieved a lot. I participated in several Gestalt workshops with him, and since he still wasn't very famous, he gave me a lot of attention. Later I was one of his successors.

What did you learn from Perls?

Perls was a prophet of the here and now, of that idea which has since become so commonplace. He made those who came into contact with him feel that there was such a thing as a path to being in the present moment. He taught how to value the moment without trying to escape into thoughts about the past and the future. In everyday life the past and the future are rarely taken as objects of reflection, but rather as objects of empty illusions. Perls's recommendation to live in the now is based on the fact that we only live the present moment. This is something that a healthy person knows, but neurotic people don't realize it as long as they are trapped in a pseudo-existence of thoughts and negative emotions.

What were your first experiences with meditation?

I had the good fortune of receiving meditation instruction from Suzuki Roshi, the first master of Zen meditation who came to the United States. Also my experience with the American psychologist Leo Zeff was important. He was one of the great experts in with using hallucinogens dealing in therapy; when done by an expert, this can greatly accelerate the therapeutic process.

I have heard that you had your definitive [transformative?] experience in Chile?

Yes, it happened in Arica with the spiritual master Oscar Ichazo. The most important pilgrimage of my life was in the desert of Azapa. About forty of us from Esalen went for months into the desert to work with Ichazo. There I experienced a true rebirth at a level of consciousness until then unknown to me. That was when I embarked on my path of profound transformation from which there was no turning back.

What happened to you there?

A tremendous expansion that came from a mystical experience.

Can you describe that mystical experience to me?

I remember having written in my journal, "I saw God face-to-face." There were no words, there was no content, I couldn't even call it silence. Words like "peace," perhaps the word "God," but the word "God" refers to something out there. Perhaps what comes closest is the word "nothing" but nothing feels like nothing and this was more everything than nothing. When I emerged from the experience, I made a gesture of prayer, of asking God for a confirmation that this was Him. And there arose spontaneously from me a song, something beautiful that I understood as a response from the divine through the creation of beauty.

What happened after that?

When I got back to California I told my friends: "I feel like I have been reborn, but that I'm like a baby without arms or legs that doesn't know how to walk and barely knows how to talk." I had a lot of self-awareness and of the distance between my acts and my inspiration. At moments of withdrawal, of mediation, I would again be taken over by a state that was like my true self, and I realized how absurdly imperfect my behavior had been during the day. Through this contrast I began an apprenticeship of life. It was like a fall that was also like a resurrection. During this time certain neurotic experiences changed radically, a certain way I had of depending on people, a particular relationship with the world. But there were moments when I felt like an idiot. There was always a knowledge that I was moving forward, but the feeling that something was missing was more intense than ever.

You have said that you went through the dark night of the soul.

This is what Saint John of the Cross called that stage of the process when after feeling an intense identification with God, he lost it.

Are there defined stages in the process of transformation? Can you describe them?

There are as many descriptions as people who have been through it. Like everything in life, this too can be looked at from many points of view. What one can see through the mystics is that after a purgative phase, comes an illuminating phase that is kind of like a spiritual honeymoon; then comes the drought, the difficulty, the obstacles in which saints lose their sanctity. Finally one reaches what is called the unitive phase.

Do you feel that you have reached that?

No, not at all. More than ever, I feel I am in a process of transition, but I do feel guided from inside. Moving forward is something my body and my soul request of me; I no longer need to be pushed from the outside.

All that about looking at your wounds, about being conscious of all the pain; does that end at some point?

No, one never stops doing that; on the contrary, it only increases. The sensation is that before, one had healthy skin and a diseased center, and then the volcano erupts and the moment arrives when one feels that one is clean in the center, one is at peace with oneself, but the wounds are more on the surface of the skin, more visible.

Is it necessary to live with this?

It seems to me that everything in nature is constructed in such a way that we keep walking without having smoke get into one's head. *

* This interview was originally done in Spanish and so here is phrase whose literal translation can be difficult to understand in English. The intent of the phrase "without getting smoke into one's head" is better understood to mean life has a way of keeping us from getting arrogant about our accomplishments.