Creative Consciousness: An Interview

Introduction

However, if you give up a part of what is, you must give up being; then you must give up living or loving, unless by proxy. So there is a will to live without refusing anything of what life is, which is the virtue that I honour most in this world. (...) Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated ones. Whatever may be the difficulties of this endeavour, I would like to be never unfaithful to any of them.

Albert Camus (1)

There are authors who become a reference point thanks to the power of their ideas and, at the same time, their exceptional life experiences and the history they have witnessed. Stephen Gilligan is one of them.

Born in San Francisco in 1954, he grew up in a difficult environment and experienced both the excesses and the wonderful utopia’s of Californian culture during the Seventies. Within that social turmoil, research, ideas, theories were developed that fostered huge transformations in Western society. It was a sort of advanced laboratory that attracted a number of researchers who contributed to a radical change in our contemporary culture, especially in the area of psychotherapy, like Gregory Bateson, Milton Erickson, Paul Watzlawick and other members of the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto. Stephen Gilligan was their student and assistant when he
attended University of California in Santa Cruz, before taking his Ph.D. in psychology at Stanford University.

These extraordinary personalities marked his education and influenced his therapeutic approach, which has also been inspired by the philosophical and spiritual principles of Eastern traditions, namely Buddhism and martial arts. These are the major founding basis of his method and thought, which cannot be identified with any of these singularly, but they combine and transcend them all, in an original synthesis, which belongs only to Stephen Gilligan. In these recent years, he has chosen to bring his deep experience to a wider field than psychotherapy, devoting most of his activity to training. He leads many workshops in the United States, Europe and Asia, and working with so many students from diverse cultures allows him to be a privileged observer of today’s society.

We are witnessing deep changes, that have become more and more complex and involve the world on a global level. We have to face difficult choices, as individuals and communities. In Stephen Gilligan’s view, we could deal with them in a positive way only developing our creative consciousness, which is the core theme of his teaching and also of the conversations in this book.

During one of his trainings, we meet in Italy at Abano, a spa town resting in the countryside in the North-eastern region, in a summer evening. It is a quiet town where summer evenings are slow and the sky is crystal-clear behind the dark hills and trees – but here, beneath a veil of calm, earth is offering something more than the humble and gorgeous beauty of the Venetian land.

In the North-East of Italy land is defined by its relationship with waters: sea, lagoons, rivers, streams, estuaries. Lands and cities here are forever married to waters. Also in this countryside, near Padua, water flows from sources and fountains, and for many centuries it has fed two opposite and complementary human needs, research and faith – it allows the coexistence of medicine with the supernatural. Sanctuaries
and the ancient abbey nearby are the witnesses of the vital force of
devotion and the ancestral roots of the community. In the countryside
are hidden many villas surrounded by Italian style gardens, where
mind and art join with nature in a harmony that we have now
forgotten, or rejected. It seems like this halo of healing, of resonance
with nature and spirit would be the perfect environment for our
conversations about consciousness and awareness, the importance of
the connection with the living world. Here, mental and natural
landscape seem to mirror each other.

Actually, the search for integration between personal reason and
consciousness, and a higher principle transcending the individual, is
one of the key issues in Gilligan's work. Just as the importance of
belonging to a community in order to be able to fully develop our
human qualities and our connection to nature. These values are at the
heart of his therapeutic approach and they appear again and again in
this conversation, like a musique de fond, or a canvas on which are
painted the complex, unexpected, provocative images of his
experience and thought.

Both are quite unconventional, like his ways and the quality of his
presence, strong and intense, but with an informal and straightforward
attitude. More than anything else, you can feel that in every
conversation, every exchange, even the most fleeting, Stephen is
offering to the other a focused and unconditioned attention. His being
attuned to the “here and now” of the relationship gives such intensity
to his presence.

In every situation he opens a space where relationship and
conversation can develop freely, thanks to the wholeness of his being,
his openness and curiosity towards the other, free from the barriers of
judgment or mental projection. I experienced it attending his
workshops, seeing him giving to each and every trainee (and there are
always many of them) the same availability and patience, whether he
is answering their questions or helping them with their psychological
challenges. I find again the same attention in these conversations with him, that are collected here as one mental journey.

He is the author of many books and he devotes himself passionately to training, so there are many ways to go in depth about his work: his workshops, his books and articles, videos... That's also why this interview was conceived as an opportunity to speak about different issues in his work and experience, and to shine a light on his personal history, so as to provide food for thought for those who are not familiar with his work, or with helping professions.

The basic principles of his approach, the Self-relations psychotherapy, are all in his book, *The Courage to Love* (2). Fifteen years after its first edition, it still remains one of his most representative and comprehensive works.

*In The Courage to Love* he presented to a wider audience, not only therapists, the results of many years of therapeutic practice. It is an existential vision of therapy, emerging from a view of psyche, symptoms and healing quite different from the perspectives of psychology and psychiatry that are prevailing in our culture. He focuses his attention on the meaning of I, identity, deep self and social self, the relationship among different part of self and the external world, seen as a flow of evolutions and transformations, that require more identity and role changes than we might think. Realizing and expressing in the world our uniqueness, our potential, is a challenging path, and to do that we need to integrate and accept all those parts that live within ourselves, even those we are denying or hiding.

He has written many other works, articles, lessons – among which *The Hero’s Journey* (3) with R. Dilts. His latest book, *Generative Trance* (4), has been published in November 2102, marking a further stage of his creative path, which is devoted to develop the generative qualities of consciousness, the skills to unveil the resources that are hidden to conscious mind, and the techniques to realize its potentialities... So this interview is not about therapeutic theories, or not only that, but is
mostly a reflection about our present condition to suggest some possible answers to it.

It is a critical overlook on ourselves and the problems of some trends of our social model. It is also an invitation to welcome and keep in mind the value of multiple perspectives: to be aware that human beings, our psyche, the world, are made up of so many contradictory parts, that we should observe without getting stuck in ideology or fundamentalism, that always lead to rejection. Searching for our personal truth cannot imply refusing or aggressing the truth of the other. Many have witnessed that it is possible to defend courageously everything that makes us deeply human, at the same time being able to accept the contradictions and limitations of our condition and practising non violence. The French writer Albert Camus believed in this moral, intellectual, aesthetical commitment, and remarked:

The recognition of ignorance, the rejection of fanaticism, the limits of the world and of man, the beloved face, beauty: here is the camp where we will join again the Greeks. In a certain way, the meaning of tomorrow’s history is not what we might think. It lies in the fight between creation and inquisition. In spite of the price the artists will pay for their empty hands, we can expect their victory. Once again, the philosophy of darkness will disappear over the shining sea. (5)

Camus wrote these words in 1948, but his aspiration to join beauty and civil action, nature and consciousness, is just as meaningful today, and it is very close to the spirit recurring in each and every page of this conversation with Stephen Gilligan. However, the writer assigned to artists and intellectuals the task of affirming the value of creation beyond fundamentalism and alienation, while today we are getting more aware that in the complexity of globalized world, this isn’t the mission of a cultural élite, but the work of all of us. It is the task of a collective intelligence and awareness, to which everybody can contribute if she or he develops as an individual, beyond any
geographical, ethnical, national belonging, or any false separation based on the colour of the skin or religious creed or any other opposition between human beings. Maybe this is how we could wrap up the message of this interview.

For all these discoveries and reflections, I wish to thank Stephen Gilligan, who offered his availability, attention and patience, all the more precious for those who know the countless engagements and journeys he faces in his professional activity. I also wish to thank the Publisher, who gave life to the project of this book, and made it possible, expressing his immediate trust. And again, I wish to thank Daniel for his advice and inspiration.

Throughout these conversations, Stephen Gilligan emphasizes that our complex times require a further evolution of individual and collective consciousness, to release it from the dominion of technology, industrialization and manipulation. However, he also reminds us that this evolution is a dream we can believe in, and it is possible. Somewhere in the campus of Stanford University, an inscription reminds us: Dedicated to the things that haven’t happened yet, and the people who are about to dream them up…

*It’s just that.*
Chapter One
Symptoms of disconnection in post-modern society

Stephen: Some of the most interesting research that has come out in the last five years has been an updated research on brain hemisphere differences, and there’s an extraordinary book that was written by a guy named Iain McGilchrist, called The Master and his Emissary, which is updated in a very deeply revised version of the hemispherical differences.

As you probably know, the view that came out in the Sixties, late Sixties and Seventies, was that the left hemisphere, which for over 90% of people is the verbal, analytical hemisphere, was called the dominant hemisphere, and originally the right hemisphere was actually called the silent hemisphere, because they thought: “Nothing’s going on”, and then they discovered: “Oh, it’s making pretty pictures, how nice!”. It was like a little kid that was drawing nice pictures, while the serious brain (was the left one), so McGilchrist, who is extraordinarily referenced - I mean, I was trying to find some references for the Generative Trance book that I just finished, and I had it on e-book and I said, “The references are here!” Then I saw a note that said: “So sorry, there are so many references that I only included like 40 pages of the most important ones, and the rest of them you have to go to my website which you can just click on” – and that it’s ridiculous – but he says that the right hemisphere is really the dominant hemisphere, that is why it’s titled the “master”. It has the masterplan, it has a visionary sense of the world as a whole, and has this whole image. It is very differentiated, but it basically sort of sends it over to the left hemisphere, which is sort of a manager, and which he says has the strengths of the 3 L’s: Language, Logic, and Linearity.
It’s the task of that hemisphere to put it into terms that can be expressed in the world. He says that really, under the best conditions, it should be get sent back to the Master for a further integration and to make it into a whole. Then there could be this creative conversation back and forth, but it’s possible; and practices both culturally and in various sub-cultures have developed where the left hemisphere sort of “hijacked” the process and grabbed on to, so: “It’s mine and my understanding of the world is the only understanding”.

And so it acts in this very divided, compartmentalized, over-analyzed point of view. And what he points out, for example, is that some of the differences that show up are that the left hemisphere does not have direct access to body feeling, that only goes through the right hemisphere, so it doesn’t feel the body directly, and thus it can’t feel the world directly. The left hemisphere prefers machines over living things, so it doesn’t feel, it prefers mechanical over living, and it thinks it’s always right but doesn’t get feedback, it’s not responsive to feedback.

Anna: I imagine that these proceedings are somehow inherent in it, they seem like a default or hard-wired quality of its functioning.

S: Yes, it’s the intellect, it’s the disembodied intellect, that is in what he calls a “virtual reality”, but it doesn’t realize that virtual reality is virtual. It thinks its map is the territory, but it doesn’t have any direct connection to the territory. So, you know, we could talk about that in terms of what my therapy approach is about, or in terms of larger social problems that are increasingly severe today, but the idea is that most people’s consciousness is now isolated and disconnected – disconnected from embodiment, disconnected from nature, disconnected from each other, and we see increasingly the more practices like television, like video games, like texting, like people being on a computer, that completely feed this isolated left hemisphere. The result is, you know, that nothing’s getting nurtured,
nothing’s getting created, communities aren’t been nurtured, people aren’t taken care of their human needs, the environment and nature isn’t getting taken care of, the other is being dealt with as an abstraction, so the left hemisphere doesn’t really have compassion, it can’t experience compassion and so it gives rise to all this violence and so forth and so on.

I grew up, I think, in a right hemisphere trance. I think it was my way to disconnect – which there are so many different ways to disconnect: we can disconnect from the world, and go into just our heads, thinking everything is like a computer game, everything is just a concept, you know, like a bureaucrat. But the other way is to sort of go into a primordial world, where everything is connected and things are symbolic, and rather than going into a bureaucratic world, you go into Dante’s *inferno*.

I think what my work is been about, is to try to appreciate the value of that, but also the need to connect it to the other hemisphere, and the world of cognition, and social responsibility, and social action, and so forth.

*A: What are the important parts of our being human that we have lost along the way?*

*S: Community. To be human, is to be able to belong to others. This is one of the core parts, and obviously this is not a novel idea, we see it in every culture throughout time, and we only can know our individual selves by being in connection to something bigger than ourselves. That’s part of what I mean by community, and there’s a lot of research that shows that precisely when a part of the field gets isolated, that’s when it starts to developing pathology. So, for example, take somethig as basic to being human as eating: if you look at the incidences of eating disorders, anorexia, bulimia and so forth, they are very strongly correlated with eating by yourself. If people eat most of their meals*
with others, the incidence of eating disorders is very, very low. The more often you eat by yourself, the more likely you’ll have eating disorders. The same with alcohol, or sex… The point is that anything that is done in isolation, tends highly likely to become pathological. So to be human, is to feel a connection to a human community. And every culture, of course, has their traditions just for simple things like eating together, family gatherings, the typical family and village and city rituals around all the major events, marriage, birth, death and so forth, and, partly with the industrial revolution, obviously, and partly with people moving around, partly with the technological developments – most notably, television – the degree of human interconnectedness has lessened considerably, and at a great, great, great cost. They said that the great disorder of modernism – like in the Forties, Fifties, Sixties – was alienation. The French existentialists, you know, a lot of poetry, and so forth… was the sense of human alienation from itself, from nature and so forth and so on. Now we have post-modernism, and it’s not that sort of Angst and isolation, it’s more of a cynicism and apathy, where we don’t trust language anymore, because the major use of language is for advertising. You always figure with language: “How are they trying to manipulate me? What are they trying to sell me? What are they trying to do?”, rather than regarding language as an honest, sincere statement. And I’m not so sentimental or naive to think that we can or even should have that a hundred percent of the time, but the fact that we don’t really trust language anymore as a way to directly communicate our humanness, is really very scary.

A: There’s also the issue of this fake communion, fake community, where everybody just want to show how many people they know or they’re connected to… like having 1,500 friends on facebook… that’s the latest craze. And still our communication loses more and more its basic trust.
S: Yes, I find it very strange but I have to say that I’m so active socially, and I think that temperamentally I’m more of a shy, private person as I really treasure my private time, that I never had any attraction to do facebook, because if I was talking to so many people, I’d think, who am I? And I can see how the cyber-community can seem so attractive to people who feel so much disconnection. But on the other hand, they actually reaffirm the problems that people are seeking to lessen. That is not really a human authentic felt sense of connection, usually. These people are symbols on a computer screen.

A: This probably shows even more how deep is the need of human connection. That’s the paradox: that this need, this thirst, like you sometimes called it, is so deep, so wide and so unquenchable.

S: Of course. It’s to be human, to be human is to connect. And I think that the basic drive of evolution is not survival, it’s becoming part of something greater. I think that the basic notion of evolution, “survival of the fittest”, is a really silly idea. I mean, if you look at a lotus flower, it’s basically following the sun all day. It’s doing as if it’s opening to its source, receiving its energy and then releasing it again. I think that the drive of human beings is the sense of to continue to develop this consciousness, that’s moving towards what we could call Christ consciousness, we could call it Buddha mind, or we could call it the greater and greater sense of realization of the One with the many, and the many with the One. That’s what’s driving the humans.

A: Could his kind of virtual drunkenness be a sort of giant mass-hypnosis? Do people mistake this fake communion with something more authentic? How can that happen? There has been manipulation and commercial exploitation, of course – but they must be based on an actual need, otherwise it wouldn’t have happened on such a wide scale.
S: A mass-hypnosis, yes. The need is for more connection, but what I’m suggesting that the relevance of the hemisphere research is—you know, what McGilchrist is on, it’s quite an extended book and it goes to some link about the two brains would have very difficult psychologies, very different understandings, very different philosophies, very different preferences in art...

So if your identity is really locked inside the disembodied virtual reality of the left hemisphere, then your understanding of connection is going to be a very different understanding of connection than if you’re holding it in your right hemisphere. It could be accumulation of, say, more addresses, or accumulation of more wealth, or accumulation of these symbolic measures, but they’re not experiential-symbolic, they don’t have an authentic biological, living connection to them. As a result, there’s no way to ever satisfy it. One of the questions that I’ve heard to be raised about how do you know when you’re addicted to something, is if you ask the question: “How much would be enough?” and if there is no number that would be enough, then you know that it’s an addiction. Because, no matter how much, you just want more and more and more, because it’s never really satisfying.

You see, all the major institutions right now they are crazy with greed, like the banking system. I think that capitalism is probably the best system that we have—it’s been much better than communism! But only as a way to create a little bit of external comfort, that can allow us to do human connection. To do authentic human connection, to work with ourselves, with our community, with our families, with our fellow men.

A: That was originally, centuries ago, the essence or the ideal of the new mindset of capitalism. A long time ago, when it was born from the Protestant ethics, its values were also about community, honesty, service. There was originally an ethic in capitalism, but it has been lost along the way, with many other things. What is your view about it?
S: Protestantism, clearly, was a reaction against the corruption of the Church. Protestant reformation was explicitly a reaction to the institution that was supposedly being representing spiritual values and had been corrupted. Spiritual guides had been corrupted, so these people said: “We reject them, we want to do something”. I have been growing up very Catholic – I might be a little biased, even if I’m not a practising Catholic now, but I was taught that the Protestants threw out the baby with the bath water, do you know that expression? And so it was a strong reaction against the corruption of a certain institution, but in many ways they are so tilted to the other side now, in this sort of non-spiritual, non meta-logical approach, where everything is just: strip everything away and make as much money as you want, don’t really believe in anything really deep and profound. And I think that this is now the major corrupting force in our world culture.

A: What kind of counterbalancing forces do you see at work today, if you see any? But I’m sure that they exist...

S: Of course there are some.

A: Where do you see them, for example?

S: I see them inmovements in the West... Actually, as I travel all around the world, Asia, South America, to people trying to find a new way that combines some sort of a non-institutional spirituality with social responsibility, with personal development. And there’s a lot of people in that camp. I think people are starting to realize that personal
development, or spiritual development, cannot be done independently of social action and social reorganization, and vice-versa. People who want to make changes and political changes, they are really forced to realize that you can’t make them without some fundamental change in your consciousness. Otherwise, you’re just replacing the old boss with a new boss.

A: Do you see it happening everywhere in the world? I mean, is that only a Western trend, a struggle going on in the West, or is it taking place also in Asia, South America, perhaps in Africa too? I don’t know if you work there...

S: No, I’ve never been in Africa. I’ll say that you have more maturity in Europe and in the United States, obviously, in terms of traditions in individual rights, and in personal development, and in psychology. On the one hand, we have the capacity to have a deeper understanding. But on the other hand, I see a greater cynicism. When I present here in the West, they go like: “Oh, you’ve got to prove it to me… you know, I’ve heard it all before and bla bla bla”… But when I present in Eastern Europe, or in Asia, there’s a sense that’s just almost a childlike excitement. You know, like: “Wow, this is great! Let’s do it!” But you don’t have as deep a tradition of values in terms of individual rights and freedoms, and the need to protect them. You have people who historically have been dominated by totalitarian governments and they’re just coming out of it, so they don’t really know how to live a life of individual freedom, and maybe they are not as confident or believing that everybody should be able to do that.

I think that we have the most experience in the West, so you’d think that there would be more leadership coming from there. But right now, I think that the United States is being the worst place I’ve ever been in my whole lifetime.
A: There are so many amazing perspectives that you can learn, going to the United States— I’m talking from the point of view of an European, of course. And at the same time, some of their values are terrible, crushing what’s deeply human in people. For example, focusing only on working as hard as possible, only on making most money as possible, on becoming at all costs the most successful engineer or IT developer and so forth and so on.

S: Did you see that in San Francisco? It’s my hometown...

A: In the Bay Area, for example.

S: Living in the Bay Area is very expensive. It’s the highest, even though New York is probably a little higher, but San Francisco is a very expensive place, especially housing— it is crazy.

A: For example, buying fresh food or fruit, vegetables, costs a lot. So the majority of American citizens cannot afford eating fresh products and are wasting their health, because processed food is the only cheap food available. To me, this is just one of the signs that something has probably gone out of control. What do you think about it? When did all of this go out of control in your country?

S: In my country? Well, I think that the United States lost a big piece of their soul when they dropped the atomic bombs on Japan, because we didn’t really have to. I mean, yes, they probably saved a lot of lives, but the moral cost of dropping a bomb on millions and millions of innocent civilians, I think cost a lot. I grew up in the Fifties, of course, when all the atomic fallout movies, the science fiction movies about the bio-
creatures, the godzillas were coming out. In the Sixties, when I came of age, I was in San Francisco, which was sort in the heart of it, of all the change. When I was in San Francisco in the Sixties, we had the Viet Nam war, we had the Black Panthers movement that started in Oakland, and that was where the Black Power and the Black awareness, which was the sort of complement to the non-violent approach of Martin Luther King, we had the hippies there and the sex, drugs & rock'n'roll – so it was amazing, you know, it was just an amazing place, it was like a Ground Zero to everything.

I look back now and see what I consider to be the enormous negative downturn the United States has made, in terms of bordering on a neo-fascist state – kind of like Italy was in the Thirties. And I really wonder what happened.

I have to say, after considerable thought given to it, that I think that the drug culture really cost a lot, in terms of the development of a vibrant, healthy human society. You know, I was involved in parts of it, so I don’t say it as an outsider, but I think that what you see in the United States today – every culture, and the United States in particular, has a dark side, but every culture, just like as every person, also has a brighter side – I think what’s happened in the United States, is the brighter side has faded. The sparkle, the encouragement, the leadership, the whole of possibility, this emphasis on continuing to develop freedoms for all sorts of people, it’s faded, it’s been sort of dominated by corporations and by people who are against women, and against people of colour and against working people and so forth.

I think that the people who were naturally kind of represent that more progressive side of that culture, took too many drugs, and drugs sort of took people out into a Trance-land. And while I can understand what was motivating them, which was the search to try to find a better way, it was a clear rejection of that sort of plastic values and the hypocrisy of 1960’s white America, I think that, like we were saying before, that like technology is doing today, it actually created even more severe problems that the ones that they were trying to resolve.
To live a human life, you have to really be present, you have to be authentic, you have to be connected to your fellow beings, you have to be aware of all these different levels of life that are going on. If you’re on drugs, on alcohol, on watching television, you can’t really be an authentic person, you cannot be responsible – part of being responsible, is being on the watch, and making sure that the lower impulses of humanity don’t predominate.

Sounds a bit conservative?

A: It looks as if it’s such a big challenge for so many human beings – especially in the developed world and in our affluent society. How can we explain that even here, you see, a very nice country, with a very good quality of life, where basic needs are fulfilled, the majority still feel much more comfortable spending time watching television, reading junk gossip magazines, even voting a politician like Berlusconi. And it’s not Berlusconi who created today’s Italy, it’s Italy who created Berlusconi. So for a lot of people, being on the watch seems to be too difficult or uncomfortable.

S: Absolutely. I read a book of interviews to C. G. Jung, interviews he took over the years, and in 1939 he was talking about Hitler. He was saying that it is Germany that’s creating Hitler, that Hitler is the voice of Germany and it’s sort of Germany speaking truth. I think so, it’s a reflection of our values.

I think that to become a human being we used to have these traditions – maybe they were preserved for upper class, the educated class – all these traditions about what it was to be a gentleman, for example. And to be sure, a lot of those traditions have a disconnected side: so you can pretend to be a gentleman on the surface, but have a real unintegrated dark side behind the scenes, so you have a façade of being a genteel person and being not so genteel when you scratch the surface. I’m not trying to use that in a sort of a romantic sense, but I think what we need
is to be able to reclaim what it means to be a full human, and to really talk about the work and the practices that are necessary to be able to develop it and maintain it.

In our consumerism consciousness, that is particularly where our major soul images come from, because the major images don’t come from the soul, they come from advertising, they come through television. We sit in front of television and we ask it to be the hypnotist that talks to our soul, and the images are plastic, and fake, and flat, bidimensional and cynical, they are not really nurturing to human life. Hopefully, one of the lessons that we can get from seeing some of the signs of potentially impending catastrophes, ecologically, or the things like what we just saw in the United States, the latest mass-murder: yesterday, there was an Army guy, looks like he was a skinhead, in a Sikh temple—those are such unhuman acts, and it’s hard not to get just numbed to them; but those should be, really, major red flags that something we are getting more and more disconnected to, is from our community. That is really, really significant. So, to say: “We decide to get more severe with criminals”, is totally missing the point. Of course, everybody that engages in such acts needs to be apprehended and needs to be prosecuted to the full extent of criminal justice, but the metaphor is that we, as human community, have lost our connection to life.

A: What you are saying makes me think of one major problem, in my perspective, represented by violence and abuses against women and children. For example, in Italy, murders of women have become a real social issue. Until today, an average of ten women a month are killed by former partners or in their family environment. In your view, where could we take action for a solution? This kind of abuse seems to me like an abuse against the very roots of life.
S: An abuse against the roots of life, I think it’s a very good way of putting it. I think the approach is multi-level. First thing you have to do, is to really have a strong no-tolerance policy. You have to really have a strong policy anti-violence against children, women, and so forth and so on. People have to speak out throughout the culture to this basic issue of: “It’s not OK. It’s not OK to hurt people, it’s not OK to discriminate against people, it’s not OK to do violence”.

If there is a strong cultural rule backed up by social laws, I think that is a very strong part of it. But that’s the “positive” version of the approach, and by positive I don’t mean superior, but it’s important to be able to say: “No”. No. To be clear, to be congruent and to have consequences. By the society.

I mean, in the States, I actually think it’s one place, from what I understand, that it is pretty strong anti-female violence. If there is a complaint by anybody and they go in there and find any sort of evidence that somebody has been physically harmed, it’s required to make an arrest, regardless of the victim. Say, if it’s a woman who has been domestically abused, it does not require charges and even if she says: “Don’t arrest him”, they will still arrest him. The responsibility should not be on the individual in such cases – because the person can really make a completely human decision in those cases, she might have children to protect, or herself, and so forth and so on. And what is bringing people to do violence against others is you have to first stop seeing the other in human terms.

There’s a great book written in the late Seventies, by an American psychologist named Sam Keen, called *Faces of the Enemy* – he showed the propaganda used by the major world powers of the Twentieth century – that would be Italy, America, England, Russia, Germany and Japan I believe – and how the other enemy country was portrayed in the media progressively at the beginning of the war. He showed that there was this uniform progression of the dehumanizing of the other, from a human to an animal, to a monster and so forth and so on. So, to do violence against another, you first have to stop seeing him as
human. Only a few, a small percentage of sociopaths – and there are some – are so sociopaths that they know exactly what they're doing in human terms and they will do it. There are some studies on domestic violence showing that most guys, when they attack their women, do so in a very disturbed state. They are angry, they are sad... it's not condoning it, but it's to say that the state was doing it. There's a small percentage that have actually their blood pulse that slows down, before they do it. I know that sounds terrible, but it's true. I had some guys like that in therapy, and it's really been a shock.

I had most of them doing couple therapy and most of the time, if you really get at the heart of it, you see that neither side wants to do violence. And again, I'm not excusing it or condoning it, but you see this sort of “I just had to do it”, and they lose it, they act out, then they are usually remorseful, etc. But there are some that when you say: “Do you realize that what you do is really severely harming your partner?” You know, I had some people answer: “Yes I know it, and she deserves it, and I'll do it”.

In this research which started in Washington, at the hand of Neil Jacobson, who unfortunately died, they found that those are the men that are not responsive in therapy. They have no interest in changing. But most are, I think most are salvageable – if you have clear limits and consequences.

Then, on the other hand, you have to have people experience the other as a human being, and getting back to what I was saying earlier, when we have educational practices, cultural practices, social practices that keep a person in the disembodied intellect of the left hemisphere, one of the realities of living in that brain consciousness, is you don’t, you can’t feel other people as human beings. They’re things, they’re just bureaucratic objects. And you know, unfortunately, probably more often than not, what it is to be treated as an object. So ultimately, it seems the only hope, in my view, is to get people to feel human connection once again.
A: In your view, is there also an issue about learning to create healthy boundaries for oneself? Sometimes the so-called “unconditional love” is seen like a person has to give everything, accept everything to show that they really love. It’s difficult for some people to see that boundaries are needed. How can one start to develop that?

S: Personally, I would never define unconditional love as needing no boundaries. I think that’s a child’s understanding. I don’t know if unconditional love is possible, but we could say a non-romantically agape-type of love for your fellow humans and acceptance, it requires boundaries. Most of the couples’ models in intimacy, have three stages in their love development. In the first stage, 1 plus 1 equals 1, and that’s really a drug state. Literally, the scientific research has shown that it’s nature’s way of drawing couples into the web. You know, when you feel that: “Oh, when I’m with my sweetheart I feel I’m wondrous, I feel no boundaries”. That’s a sweet state, but it’s a temporary drug state. I don’t mean that cynically, it’s a nice thing, but like a vacation is a nice thing, going to dance is a nice thing, you get to lose your social self for a little while.

In almost all the couples’ intimacy development models, the second stage is 1 plus 1 equals 2, when you feel that your partner is different than you, and part of that is they’re not fulfilling your fantasies, your ideal about: “My partner was supposed to complete me, my partner was supposed to be the one that will allow me to feel whole”. At that point, that’s where violence would be really possible, if you have this sense of: “You are in the world to fulfil my needs, and you should have no needs of your own, your role is to be able to serve me”.

Then you have the reality, that always develops, which is that the other persons can’t do it, they cannot complete you, they cannot fulfil you. And again, I’m not speaking about that cynically, but it’s just that
another person can't do that work for you. So, then you have confusion, you have anger, you have depression, you have anxiety, then you start to act out, and that's when a lot of the main problems of couples develop.

If you continue, you reach a point where you discover you just can't make it anymore, you'll have to break up or something has to change. That's usually, to me, where couples come to see a therapist.

Hopefully, you can have people move to the possibility of the third stage, where you have quantum math, and quantum math is 1 plus 1 equals 3. That means that's a mature love. In mature love, you actually own boundaries, the sense “I’m me, you are you, and we are not the same person. You have different needs, you have different values, you have a different vibe”. To really enjoy love, I have to prospect that and appreciate that. It’s a lot of work to do that, and this is where a big piece of my work comes in. You have to make the connection with the unconscious, wounded, incomplete part of yourself, that you have been unconsciously hoping somebody else would heal that part of you. It’s sort of cute and sweet in the early stages. But it’s pretty ugly in the late stages, where you have a sense that: “This part of me still needs healing and my partner is unable to do that”. That's when people get desperate, and start doing things that they later regret. So a big process of becoming human, is to have self awareness of oneself. It is to have the sense of one's emotional needs and emotional self, and to be able to connect with them in the ways that you are hoping that other people can do that, because others can’t do it for you.

From that place of internal connection, then you are able to share love, then you are able to really love another person, not out of desperation, and not out of the hope that some other completes you, but just out of this human sense of being able to share a life with another human being.

In all the old traditional ideas of marriage, when you really look at it, there is a sense that each person should appreciate the needs and the
values of the other. Some cultural versions of that, say that the woman should always be there to take care of the man, and those times have changed. Partly because the economic situation has brought women to be closer to being equal players as economic beings. The division of labour that typified traditional culture, where the man went out to make the money and the woman took care of home, that’s not really predominant anymore. As far as I can tell, there’s no substitute for a lot of hard work, that’s done both on a social level, in terms of groups and associations, things like women’s rights and so forth, and also at the individual level, in terms of really helping couples to understand that they really have to negotiate some sort of socially equitable relationship. And it’s hard work, there are no fixed values that you could just assume.

Love is, in actual reality, really hard work. When I wrote the book with the title The Courage to Love, it’s not meant in any way as a sentimental thing or just an emotion that overwhelms you, but as a way to deeply and honourably negotiate, a way of connecting honourably with another person and another presence in your life – without giving up yourself, and without trying to dominate or control the other.

Anybody who’s ever been in a relationship, which I presume have been all of us, knows that it's the hardest work that you’ll ever do.

A: Maybe we need to go through different stages in life and if we are lucky enough, we find a way to live and share it with another person. Actually, sometimes we really are lucky enough!

S: Yes, sometimes we are! And again, you know, luck it’s not something that just happens to you – there are many different people with so many different versions of the quote: “I noticed that the more I practice, the luckier I get”! We have to want to have a happy, complete,
honourable life. We have to want it with all of our mind, and all of our soul and all of our heart.

And in our television-based culture, I think we have lost that. People just think that just watch television and get entertained and eat junk food bla bla bla (is enough)... we don’t have the sense of the *passion* that’s needed to really have a happy life. It’s not something that happens to you, it’s not the advertising view, that happiness.

But real happiness really takes a wholehearted commitment, and then you have to have a little luck. But what’s really important to know, is that it’s possible, and that there are examples – you know, I’m always looking for examples, for life-models – and now, at my age, I have no interest in copying anybody. When you are younger you think: “I’d like to be more like that person, I’d like to follow in their footsteps...”, but now I have no interest in being anybody but me. But I need to have good models, consistently, and I’m always looking for it. When I see it, I say a silent sort of gratitude saying: thank you for reminding me, thank you for showing me that this kind of living is possible.
Chapter Two

Another vision of therapy

A: You said before that you’re always looking for positive life models. Are you talking about normal people you meet in everyday life, or about important well-known figures, or maybe somebody in your family?

S: Yes, friends, colleagues, historical people, they can even be fictional characters in books. I’ve taken it as a practice to do it with people I work with, to make really a commitment to get therapy from my clients. Of course, by that I don’t mean that they are there to fix my problems, but I think that any time that I see an act of courage, a real creative action on the part of a human being, I want to open up and drink it in, and appreciate when people can share that with others, then their lives are better.

As therapists, we sometimes start we don’t want to receive anything from our clients. But most people get better in their human lives when they can give to others – and again, I emphasize I don’t mean that in terms that I need my clients to fulfil my emotional needs – but I do want to receive any time I see their courage, any time I see something they’ve done that’s really extraordinary, to take that in. I tell them. I say: “I just want to thank you, because you’ve given me something. When I experience your courage in doing that, it helps me as a human being. It gives me more encouragement to do that for myself, so thanks a lot”.

A: This seems to me a very human perspective, going beyond the usual roles of therapist and client, or the classical therapeutic setting. It’s being human and going beyond a frame.
It’s human. And it’s better. I mean, in the end, what else is there? When we are on our deathbed (may it be far in the future!) and we are looking back, we’ll just remember those moments, we will treasure those moments.

A: Your approach looks so different from the traditional one, especially the psychoanalytical classical approach, where the therapist stays behind your couch and says almost nothing. I personally experienced that for several years, and I’m curious if you would save anything of that vision and of that history for our contemporary society.

S: I think Freud was a great thinker. We sort of honour him as one of our founders. When I visited his offices both in Vienna and London, I felt I was making a sort of pilgrimage to Mecca, and it touched me in a way deeper than I anticipated. I think that Freud did a horrible thing when he changed his stance on sexual abuse. I think probably more than anything else, that in the cultural times, the Viennese era of the late Nineteenth century, what was possible in terms of method was extremely limited compared to contemporary culture.

The connection between doctor and patient was within that cultural setting had to be much more distant and, within that context, psychoanalysis was shocking and what they were proposing: listening to people’s stories, taking people’s stories of suffering seriously, was really shocking. I don’t know if you know the book by Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*. It’s a great book, considered a classic. She talks of abuses on women going through these ebbs, these times when it was brought to the forefront and then it faded, and then it came back, and she said that the first time that trauma began to be taken seriously was by Freud and his colleagues, in terms of women’s stories about being traumatically abused. She says the second era was right after the World War, when all these veterans came back with what we now call PTSD, but they called “war-neurosis” or “shell shock”. They couldn’t treat them with expensive treatments like
psychoanalysis – that was when things like hypnosis started to come back. Then, the third era was in the Seventies, when women rights started coming into account, and again, stories about abuse started coming in and other stories were taken seriously.

So Freud, those methods, were developed in a culture that is so far removed from today, that if you were still using something approximating that method, I think you would be so disconnected from the possibilities of contemporary society that they probably wouldn’t be fully relevant.

Having said that, my major therapy mentor was Milton Erickson, and one of the most radical emphasis of Milton Erickson was that the psychological theory should always be secondary to the individual uniqueness and the connection to the individual uniqueness of each person, each client in psychotherapy. So, if you had some static theory or some fixed theory that you were using to place all of your patients into, it would be considered to be an act of violence, because you wouldn’t be really paying attention to their individual uniqueness, but you would be just categorizing them within your ideological categories, which would be a form of religious persuasion, rather than actual therapy of that unique individual. I could say more about that, but I think you got the drift.

So, partly about that, and partly from my own temperament, I’m very suspicious of fixed therapeutic methods, because they should be open to the presence through which human connection can be made, not to pick ideological categories into which people are categorized. That is a fundamental value, at the heart of all that I do. There is a great quote by a German psychiatrist you’ve heard me talking about, Karl Durckheim, and Joseph Campbell used to say this often. He said that the goal of all our living is to become transparent to the transcendent, and to become open to something coming through us, that is beyond words, that is beyond description.
I think that is true in the therapeutic connection, I mean, you can call it trusting the creative intuition, trusting the creative unconscious. What I’m trying to help people to do in therapy, is to be well connected with themselves at an individual level, to be true and congruent and have the most integrated sense of their individual selves, but also appreciate: “I can’t do it by myself, I can’t do it in isolation, I have to open to something deeper in my life”.

Alcoholics Anonymous say: “a higher power as you best understand it.” But it gets back to what we started to talk about at the beginning: the sense of an individual human life belonging to something bigger as the only way to feel the completeness and the wholeness that gives good health and good happiness. To be a good, happy, creative, contributing citizen of life, you have to feel whole, you have to appreciate that, as an individual: “On one level I’m whole, but on another level I’m not, I have to belong to something bigger”.

I think the therapist should be appreciating that, you can do it and you don’t have to be spiritual, esoteric – I think you can do it in a pretty solid way, saying that we need to be present, responsible individuals here, be clear, what I was talking about. But we also have to be a little open to the mystery of life, in order to have the pleasure, the joy, the learning in each moment and each day. We have to realize this one dimension of life that is a mystery.

A: How can we relate the whole issue of mental illness to this view? There is an established vision of mental suffering that is relying on the DSM, on the descriptions of pathological symptoms, on protocols of treatments, on pharmaceutical drugs against all kinds of psychological troubles, and so on and so forth. What do you say about that?
S: DSM, or “pathology”, are religious terms... I could say hours and hours and hours on that topic, but first thing I’d say, is that “mental illness” is a poetic term, is a metaphor. It is not a literal, scientific term.

I’m not the first to talk about this, and those who raise the issue are profoundly attacked in many, many ways. Because Thomas Szasz in the late Sixties wrote this book that’s still relevant, called The Myth of Mental Illness, and just had a practical mobile: the profound cost of thinking of people primarily in terms of mental illness or mental defects or pathology, is that we immediately lose the human being in the process. Of course, If you read the DSM, it says a person should never be reduced to their diagnostic category. But in practice, that doesn’t happen. I have been a praxis psychotherapist for almost 40 years, I teach around the world and I have participated in many, many conferences and many conversations, at many levels, about how people talk about clients, and most of the time therapists talk about clients in terms of diagnostic categories. “I have a depressed person”, they say. What does that actually mean? Well, it sounds meaningful, it sounds like really talking about something that is the same for every person, but I don’t think that’s really the case, that the individual differences, when you really start touching in the individual realities of people, the differences are in many meaningful ways more significant than the communalities.

So am I suggesting we use no diagnostic categories? No. But I’m suggesting that the issue should be regarded like personal hygiene and money: they are important, but they should never be given primary importance. If you ignore personal hygiene, you’re in trouble; if you don’t take a bath for 30 days, not much else is really possible! If you ignore your relationship to money, not much else would be possible. But if you make it your primary focus, not much else is really possible either.

I have a lot to say about psychiatric drugs. I think they could have a secondary place in working with people, and they obviously assumed a primary role in the alleged therapeutic treatment. I think it's the
greatest travesty in the history of medicine. I'll repeat it: I think it's the greatest travesty in the history of medicine, in terms of how the pharmaceutical companies have completely corrupted the medical and psychiatric field and got people into this absolutely, absolutely crazy unfounded beliefs: one of the basic beliefs, for example, about biological psychiatry: first, that a person's suffering is a cause of a chemical unbalance in the brain.

First of all, even if that were true, I think it is the craziest sort of thing, to say that a person's relationship, even a person's diet, a person's emotional life and what they're doing on a day-to-day basis is having very little influence on their emotional and psychological state, it's merely a chemical unbalance in the brain, that is totally independent on how they are living their life. If that is not the most profound piece of bullshit I ever heard, I don't know what it is!

Now, you have the small problem that the chemical unbalances don't exist, that there are none that have been reliably found. So, the sort of founding base for all this biological psychiatry is that you can detect demonstrably reliable differences in the chemical makeup of a depressed person or of a non depressed person: there's no evidence for that.

Then, secondly, that if you give a person this drug, that the specific chemical composition of this drug will alter their experience and their behaviour in a significantly positive way. Again, there is no evidence for that. There is some evidence that if you drug people, there's a general drug effect. That would be almost akin to saying that if you give them a pint of whisky, you will affect their behaviour. Most of the symptoms that are affected in schizophrenia, in depression, anxiety, are what are called the “positive” symptoms, which is to say the hallucinations, the delusions, the anxiety... It basically dampens consciousness, it numbs it, it dumbs it down, and that's the majority of the symptom relief that you find in psychiatric drugs.
So, to disregard all the day-to-day experiential dimensions of a person’s life, their family life, their relational life, how they’re behaving in the world, (saying it) has a secondary or no relationship to their state, is just astonishing to me. It’s astonishing. And to say that to change a person, the best thing to do is we can drug them and do no other treatment – and in American psychiatry that’s pretty much the case— absolutely is malpractice.

What we are talking about is a sort of core theme, is that what we need is more human connection and human presence – in order to be able not to wholly resolve the myriad of problems, but to be able to be more than just solve problems, to be able to enjoy life.

At the end of the day, and at the end of a life is that a person can look back and have a sense of “That was a really, really good one!”. Drugging people is not the answer. It’s part of the problem.

Now, some people say: “What are the alternatives?”. And that is an excellent question. Gandhi used to say if the only alternative to passive submission to injustice was violent resistance to it, he would recommend violent resistance in virtually every case. That’s pretty amazing, coming from Gandhi.

He said: “Do I accept this injustice, I accept this violence against me, or I can fight against it? And trying to hurt that person that is hurting me?” I would say: “Fight, hurt those that are hurting you”. But there’s a third way, and he called that “satyagraha”, the truth-force, the force of soul-power. That’s what we, as a mental health community and psychologists and psychotherapists have failed as a community: that we should be the ones responsible in the community for saying: “There is a better way, we don’t have to just let people suffer from panic, from anxiety, from depression, from alcoholism and so forth”. There is a better way. Because for a lot of people, they’ll say: “If it’s between untreated depression and a psychiatric drug, I’ll take a psychiatric drug”. I have heard many of them. Even though the studies show that
there is no significant effect of psychiatric drugs for depression, beyond the placebo effect. That’s pretty significant.

So you see, I’m a little bit excited about this topic. I got a little over the top…

A: It is a very important one, I’m sure it’s a topic we could continue to develop.

S: The topic I would like to develop is the dimensions of the human being and that we’ve lost our way to doing it. We can get lost in the isolated, disembodied intellect of the left hemisphere. We’re no longer even aware that we are living beings, in a living world.

A: Labeling, pigeonholing people in categories and pathologies is not even easier for many therapists – in my view, it is not just a way to escape from the complexity of individual beings, but a whole mental construction. Many therapists are sincerely convinced of their theories and deeply believe in them.

S: It’s religious ideology. That’s fundamentalism, and really at the heart of scientific enterprise is be skeptical about everything. This is what meditation and science share: distrust what your mind believes, always check it out. Always check it out, because the mind is capable of such self-deception, that you always have to have healthy doubts and healthy questions. And soon as you think something is absolutely correct, then – beware.
Chapter Three
The importance of Generative Consciousness

A: I’d like to reconnect again to McGilchrist’s book – for me the analogies and resonances between his work and your The Courage to Love are striking. How do your therapy methods rely on right-hemisphere skills and how do they act to enhance them?

S: I’m not sure exactly what you mean about these striking parallels, certainly I would say that there are similarities. I don’t know if it’s really necessary to know what do you mean by the striking parallels, you know, but what McGilchrist is doing, as I said in the interview, I think he’s doing a masterful updating and revision about the neuroscience of the two different brains, the right hemisphere and the left hemisphere, and in a lot of ways he’s talking about each as some sort of filter. In my work, the basic idea is consciousness creates reality, that consciousness is creating reality through filters. The brain is an obvious filter, but also your cognitive mind such as your beliefs, your images, your social setting etcetera, these are all different filters if you will, they’re sort of like the stained-glass windows in the European cathedrals through where the sun streams. So I think what he’s very beautifully saying is that these are two very different filters, and the right hemisphere is the primary filter, it’s the primitive filter and it’s really creating a more direct experiential sense of the wholeness of the world.

Once that filter makes its map, it sends it over to the left hemisphere, that, through what McGilchrist calls the 3 L’s (language, logic and linearity) it starts making maps of the maps or representations and then use them to execute things. So, roughly speaking, those
correspond to what has traditionally been called the unconscious and the conscious mind. And if you’re asking me, historically I would say that it has always been a great interest to me, because as a kid, I remember very deeply absorbing, like in family events, conversations, and just really feeling this very deep connection with what seemed that people were feeling – I felt this telepathic or limbic connection with people, and was fascinated by it. Of course I didn’t know that there was anything but that. But then, when people opened their mouths and started to talk, I remember assuming in some way that they were talking about what I was tuning into, as to what their felt sense of the world was. When they were saying something totally unrelated or maybe opposite to it, I remember being very shocked, troubled and confused by this. I think this was some of the first noticing that the words people use often don’t match the pre-verbal experience that they’re carrying. This continued in terms of seeing the hypocrisy of people and authorities talking about things that really seemed to me they weren’t directly experiencing.

That said as where it started, and of course that transferred directly into therapy. You know, Erickson used to say: “You define neurosis as the inability to speak directly”. In other words, when you can’t say: “This is my truth, this is my experience, this is my reality” – then you disconnect, then your left hemisphere, with all the verbal representations, is not connected to the right hemisphere with all the pre-verbal patterns.

That’s the history, and trance to me came when very young, when I met Erickson, it was then I tried to reconcile the two. Because what you do in trance, is you let go of your words for a while. You stop talking, you stop performing and you go down into the pre-verbal and the non-verbal. In McGilchrist, in the neuroscience language, you move from the left-hemisphere identification into a right-hemisphere identification. In that case, it’s a reconnection to your base, it’s coming back to your core, if you will.
Now, that in and of itself isn’t enough, just wandering off and stop thinking, but once you reconnect to the base, then you can open up to words again, hopefully in a way without losing your base or leaving the base again. In other words, to be able to unite the pre-verbal and non-verbal holistic patterns of the right hemisphere with the verbal, sequential, self-aware representations of the left hemisphere. And what the generative trance work does, and the generative self work that I do, is really primarily understood doing, is bringing those two together, so it creates a sort of a third level, where you have really a conversation between the hemispheres. It’s neither right-hemisphere dominant, nor left-hemisphere dominant, but a conversation between them. And when that conversation is a good one, there are emergent properties, the things that come out of it, you have this sort of quantum math, that 1 plus 1 equals 3.

That is what I call creative consciousness – not creative unconscious, but creative consciousness. That’s what I mean by generative. So, I think that answers your question!

A: You answered more than one question, actually! I’d like to go on with the theme of generative consciousness and generative trance. Before, you have emphasized the importance of developing what’s deeply human in ourselves and our communities – how does the work with generative consciousness and trance help to create that?

S: Let’s use in this context the word “creative consciousness”, and think of generative trance as one form of creative consciousness. I would always say that the point of the work is not trance, and trance is not the primary interest. The point of the work is creative consciousness, and generative trance is one vehicle for doing that. Creative consciousness is an integrated wholeness of the human experience, and I think that is ultimately the point of all high culture and education and therapeutic
work, that were looking to see if we can develop creative, whole, humane people.

In some ways it’s a bit more like the Renaissance period, much of that was centered in Italy, but then (there was) the appreciation, before the Cartesian dualism started to split things asunder, there was really this great interest in bringing together spirit, body and mind into these great expressions. On aesthetic grounds, on spiritual grounds, on evolutionary grounds – and in many ways I would say on survival grounds, because technology has developed to the point, and our technological capacity is so great, that if we don’t have a creative consciousness, the destructive consequences are that technology will dominate, and if they do, that will mean the destruction of the planet.

A: In this thought I find another link to what McGilchrist’s says. A connection between what you say in The Courage to Love and what he writes, 12 years after your book. Of course you have a different goal in your work, but it seems now that some very deep qualities of our being human are also proved by scientific research.

S: Science and neuroscience give us a way to begin to appreciate the deepest realities of the conversation between multiple perspectives. And that’s something I think that we lost. I wouldn’t consider my work totally the same as his, and in many ways, the book that is coming out next month (in November 2012), The Generative Trance, is much closer than The Courage to Love to that – what I’m telling you right now is in the book! But I think that there are many different thinkers and writers that are converging on this point, it’s not a singular point of view, I think that it’s one of the good pieces of news. At the same time, it’s the old line: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”, by Charles Dickens – one of the famous English literature lines – at the same time, we see an increased industrialization of consciousness and that it’s
getting stronger in a lot of fields like in psychotherapy and in education; so it’s one of those things where you’re going to conceive two different paths of moving towards some point. You wonder who’s going to get there first, or maybe there are two different strands of the same thing, because they seem both increasing at the same speed, you know, the destruction and the transformation.

A: There are so many movements today, even at the academic level, take for example the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research in Stanford or the Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education, and many more, that are working to foster a new vision of consciousness and to develop a human community based on compassion and on a secular view, however trying to apply the basic principles of human consciousness to schools, organizations, politics... – It seems to me that it corresponds to what you’re saying.

S: I agree. That’s the point I was looking to make: I think that there are many, many parallel and convergent points of view, and, you know, part of what I’m saying really you can date it to the systemic revolution, that started in cybernetics, and even before that, with the theory of systems by Von Bertalanffy and people like that. In many ways, it was the opening of the right hemisphere, in McGilchrist’s terms, because they are all systemic models, they’re all saying that the intelligence is in the whole, and the whole is made up of multiple interacting parts, and so the power and the intelligence can’t be located in any one of the parts, it’s distributed throughout the system.

That’s basically the right-hemisphere filter, and I think what we’re starting to develop, is very exciting – yes, it’s addressing how to combine these two hemispheres if you will. Because what the left hemisphere has really allowed, is self-awareness, and this can’t be underestimated, its value is absolutely astonishing. But what McGilchrist truly does very well, very cogently, is he says: that has come
at the cost of the connection to the whole. So the self-awareness of one part of the system has come at the cost of the connection to the whole system.

You’ve got these two different modes: one is everything is whole and everything is interconnected, the other is: you have the self-awareness and the capacity to act, intentionally. In some ways, those two have been just floating alongside each other: when you take action, you have got more of this ego-consciousness, one person, one part of the system trying to exert an influence, controlling the whole of the system or another part of the system. Then, when you get into the other mode, it’s sort of without agency – you see this in a lot of meditation approaches. I’m not putting it down, I’m just saying that for our present needs it’s incomplete. You have this sense of being with everything and feeling the interconnectedness with everything, but not being able to act with any agency, while you are into that experience. The whole challenge of the generative consciousness is how to be able to do both at the same time.

I don’t know if when we were in Abano I was mentioning Thich Nhat Hanh... He has said something that I think it’s a very insightful piece of wisdom: he says that the next Buddha will not come as an individual, but as a group. The days of the super-heroes are over. But, really, what I’m saying is that if you would have a generative group – that would mean that if everybody would feel a part of the wholeness of the group, and act in connection with the wholeness of the group, but if at the same time people would have self-awareness and agency, in some ways it’s what a really good creative leader has to do.

A creative leader has to feel a connection very deeply with the group that he/she’s leading. But usually there is just one leader and the leadership is set on that person. So I think that what Thich Nhat Hanh is talking about, is that every person would be a leader, in essence, and every person would be a follower at the same time.
A: I’m glad that you introduced this topic, because the idea of collective intelligence is so crucial in today’s research. Before, you were talking about the beginnings of the systemic theories, and you were deeply in that culture, because Bateson was one of the first who opened that path and you were his student. What kind of differences do you see between the approach of those great personalities, like Bateson, Erickson, Watzlawick and many others, and our vision today?

S: Do you know that famous quote by Charles Darwin? He said that we stand on the shoulders of giants. Those guys were giants, they made this radical shift, you know, Bateson talking about systems, he and his colleagues, and Erickson talking about the systemic intelligence of the creative unconscious – but I don’t think that they were able to do what is now possible for us, is to more clearly describe the observing consciousness as both a part-of and apart-from the system.

In Bateson’s work and in systemic theories in general, the system is basically described in an “it” language, it’s not being a human presence. The system is not a human presence. It’s an “it”, it’s talked about in the third person, so the person who’s describing the system is usually outside of the system. That was the era, yes, it was in a sense a left-hemisphere approach, and certainly Bateson was not a very somatically connected person!

And Erickson, also one of the major flaws in his work I think was that he didn’t include his own presence, in accounting for the creativity of the unconscious. So, in other words, Erickson would say: “The unconscious is very intelligent”. But he didn’t explain, if it was so intelligent, why was the patient in the office in the first place?

If the unconscious is so brilliant, why was the person getting in such trouble? So, clearly, before the patient got to see Erickson, their unconscious was not acting in an intelligent way. But, Erickson started
talking with his patient and, all of a sudden, he observed that their unconscious was very creative!

So, how do you account for that? I think there's one of three ways — one is you can say: “The creative unconscious is independently inside of the external person in the patient” and really identified with the problems of that are.

Second, and that's what a lot of people did, they said: “It was the brilliance of Milton Erickson's that was making the person's unconscious do brilliant things”. You know, all the narrative of Erickson-The-Brilliant, and people think: “Well, you just wear a purple wheelchair around your neck the rest of your life, and then some of that will rub off on you!”

The third is that, somehow, it was a relational connection between what we may call the conscious mind of Erickson and the unconscious mind of the patient. And that’s a non-local, systemic mind. It’s not in the patient, it’s not in Erickson, it’s somewhere in between them. Erickson ever in his modeling, in his descriptions of his work, I don’t think he accounted for that, and it’s understandable that he didn’t, because that was just not an idea that was in the mind at that point.

I think that what we have now is this capacity to talk about observing consciousnesses as simultaneously participants that are deeply connected and interwoven to everything that they are observing, and influencing what they're observing. But we all have this capacity of the left hemisphere to have an external observation, to have a map of being one step removed, if you will. McGilchrist says this is the advantage of the left hemisphere. As human beings we need to both participate directly in the world, and there are many times in a day where we have to take a step back. We have to get a little distance, and we have to think about something a little bit more dispassionately – so, this dissociation, if you will call it that, is an integral part of creative consciousness.
Sometimes you're totally in it, and sometimes you need to take a step back. So I don’t think that this is the first generation of systemic theories accounting for the observing consciousness being an integral part of the observation, of the observed system.

It brings all sorts of paradoxes, because you get into these double contradictory truths, and in one way, that's one of the beautiful things about trance, is that it allows contradictory truths to be experienced simultaneously without a conflict. That is in a consensus across most hypnosis theories, about one of the defining characteristics of trance experience, it's called “trance logic”: it means the capacity to experience contradictory realities simultaneously without any conflict. That means: “I'm connected to it, I’m disconnected from it; I feel it, I don’t feel it; I'm not lifting my hand, I'm lifting my hand...” This double truth is an integral part of creative consciousness.

A: *It's like saying: “I want to stay AND I want to escape”!*  

S: *Exactly!* If you look at all the different research on creativity, this is a common characteristic… I don’t know if we talked about that in the beginning of the interview?

A: *No, but I remember you often talked about it in trainings and seminars.*

S: In any of the works on creativity, what you find is that really creative people enjoy thinking in opposites: they like paradoxes, they like puzzles, they like jokes, which is a lot of double-frames, they don't only get pleasure from it, but they thrive in thinking in terms of these
opposites and paradoxes. I think it gives us a fuller sense of the complete reality of things.

A: There's also the point of how to deal with the suffering that these contradictory truths can bring, how to find the balance between, for example: “I want to stay in the relationship and I want to escape”, “I'm happy and I'm suffering”, and so on and so forth. We should learn to come to terms with this suffering, but how?

S: I would say that you don't experience that, when you're a sociopath!... I mean the joy and the suffering, the good side and the bad side, those are the parts of human life, and usually what people do, of course, is a well-known fact: people try to go towards the positive and avoid the negative. And this creates this sort of rigid one-sidedness that locks people in this fixed point of view, and people create what I called a neuro-muscular lock. One of the things that thinking in opposites allows you to do, it's to feel this center of consciousness that is neither the opposites. It's called the center. In Buddhism, this is called “equanimity”, equanimity in English just means “equal-naming” for both sides.

So you're no longer thinking primarily as opposites — I say primarily, because you still have the sense of “that's desirable, that's undesirable”, “that's pleasurable, that's not pleasurable”, but the notion of a center is a more basic consciousness place, that allows you to be with both simultaneously, without getting attached to either.

What I actually think that aids you in dealing with this central human problem, of how do you find a balance between that, of how do you, if you're going to open to life, you're opening to the joy of life and you're also opening to the suffering of life, there is no way around it. You can try to develop these fantasy theories, cults and groups that think: “Well, if I just get into this ideology I will never have to suffer again”,

but I think we all know these utopian visions are fantasies. That to be human is to know both joy and suffering. You keep bringing up the question: “What is it to be deeply human?” and I think that being deeply human is to be able to know something even more basic than that.

Ultimately, this is what spiritual practices have been about and I think that most ways that people practice spirituality, are not ultimately in that spirit, they’re trying to get the good and norm out the bad, but if you look at Buddha-mind or Christ-consciousness, you see some really beautiful possibilities of the human spirit, and then, opening to that, it’s not that you no longer have values.

If you look at somebody like Nelson Mandela, he had the same human grace and respect and courtesy to his oppressors who kept him in jail for 30 years. It’s just amazing! As he did to his friends and allies. But you can see in somebody like Mandela or like Gandhi, that it wasn’t that their sense of what was right or wrong, dissolved, they were not emotionally rigid in the way that they practiced it. It allowed them to be much more powerful, far more clear and far more persuasive in terms of their views of right and wrong.

So there’s a place before, beneath and beyond duality, and I think one of the main ways that you get there, is that you hold both sides of the duality. That’s one of our general principles of generative trance. But when you can hold both sides of the relationship, you can actually pop up to a place beyond either sides – and if that sounds too esoteric, that’s what a good joke does!

A: So, in this perspective, working on generative trance and generative consciousness can be a life-long work, it’s not something that you do once and say: “Ok, I worked on it and found out what I needed to find”, but it’s something that you can repeat all over your life, to find always something new and something deeper?
S: Absolutely, and talking about this specific content of generative self, we’re talking about a life path of a human being. If you ask anybody: “How long do you have to study love to become an expert?” I think that everybody would laugh about that, because they know nobody gets to be a real master. “How long do you have to spend to become an expert parent?” … everybody laughs, because they know that is a never-ending process.

So we need to distinguish in the work, what the work is addressing, which is how to be on the path of becoming a full human being, and then the specific content or the methods used in the work. It may work for you for one session, you may explore generative trance for 2 days, for 2 years, for 20 years, you find something else fits for you better – to me, that’s what you need to do, but what the work is addressing, I think it’s the core issues of how to keep growing and evolving as a human being. And that’s a never-ending story.
Chapter Four
My model of therapy

A: I would like now to ask you about martial arts, since they had a key role in your development, especially aikido – Morihei Ueshiba (25) considered the accomplishment of the human being as the ultimate goal of his martial art. How does that principle resonate in your work?

S: Well, it's a rather interesting thing. You know, my professional development of course started with Milton Erickson, when I was nineteen, at that time I was practising tae kwon do, which is a Korean karate, and I think it was very helpful in terms of just mind-body development. It was about ten years later, when I was living in San Diego, that I began to train in aikido. What I felt in aikido was a most extraordinary match to Milton Erickson's work – it's really quite extraordinary the degree of similarity between Erickson's approach to transforming problems, and Ueshiba's approach to transforming and dealing with aggressive conflict.

What is especially interesting is the fact that they sort of were forced to develop their work from almost opposite starting points. In many ways, Erickson's work developed out of his paralysis, from polio that he developed at the age of seventeen – so he could not move at all during his formative years, and he had learnt to perceive and think without any use of his voluntary muscles. Of course, his approach was developed before that, he was immensely curious and had this idea of how to creatively work with human patterns before his polio, but I think that was really sort of his especially formative time.

Ueshiba, on the other hand, was legendary in Japan as probably the most accomplished, outstanding of its martial artists, and during the
turn of the 1930’s, when Japan was getting very strange with its imperialistic right-wing orientation, he was at that point, a civilian adviser to the top military people, in Japan what is called the *bushido*, which is sort of the spiritual basis for the warrior energy, and he kept saying to the people he was advising, “What’s happening in Japan is not true warrior spirit” – and they said, “Yeah! Thanks for sharing, shut up and sit down!” And during the war, he went to his farm in Iwama in Japan, which was notable for any Japanese person, but particularly this legendary martial artist, and it was during this time that he had this awakening, that using a stronger aggression to deal with aggression would in the end merely feed more aggression.

If you try to defeat force with force, that would usually promote even further force, because you can kill a person, but then his brother and his cousins would be coming after you, and then kill you, and then your brothers and cousins, etcetera. So, in this sort of epiphany moment, he had this realization that the only true way to deal with a negative aggression, was to transform it. And that is when aikido was born, and he had all these techniques, he had this base from judo, but it was contextually shifted to this way of dealing with aggression in a way that would reconcile the conflict. This is the heart of aikido, and you could say in many ways it is also the heart, spiritually and psychologically, of Milton Erickson’s work.

It became a secondary path for me, in exploring Erickson’s work, and my part of that legacy – and because it does it in a very different way than primarily you are doing it through physical martial art, it became a beautiful complement to my exploration of Erickson’s work, and in many ways it extended and expanded the Ericksonian trance-work in different ways. I think that the self-relations work that came out, and *The Courage to Love* was an expression of that, (was) that integration between Ericksonian work and aikido.
A: And then in his latest stage Ueshiba developed a form which was not self-defense against an opponent to be destroyed, but a form of dialogue with another “self”...

S: I don’t know if you could really validly say that; I mean, he was basically a martial artist to the end, into his eighties when they would carry him up to the third story, where the main dojo (26) was, that was called Hombu Dojo in Tokyo, but he didn’t really directly apply it to psychological or non-martial areas, even though the context from which he worked transcended that martial area – but the applications that he developed personally, didn’t, to my knowledge. There has been a lot of emphasis in the West on some of the non-martial applications of aikido, but I think that sensei (most of his student and followers called him like that, sensei means something like “Great Teacher”), he didn’t do that directly.

A: So, could we say that your application, your metaphor of aikido and martial non-violence is your development on that basis, it is not what Ueshiba was doing, but a further stage developed by you and other Westerners?

S: Yes, and I think there have been a number of people that have tried to extend and apply his work in other areas. You know, I have trained in aikido for about sixteen years and I know some of the different communities in aikido, and, as you would expect, there are some who very strictly confine it to a martial art, and there are others who have tried to apply it beyond martial arts. I think it’s sort of inevitable that you would have these different groups. I think there is a lot of room for application, because there’s not that many people who really are personally interested in training in martial arts – you know, when I first got into aikido, I was in the true, fervent believer phase, and I thought everybody would love to get out on the mat and be got thrown around! I would bring friends and, you know, the vast majority after one class would say, “Thanks, but no, thanks!” But the principles, I think, are just like the principles of Milton Erickson’s work.
I sometimes talk about the generative self work in terms of an aikido approach – we will all face conflict regularly in our lives, it is just an inevitable, integral part of any life development. And the more interesting a life that you want to lead, the more conflicts that you will face – as I say, it is an integral part of human development. So I think that aikido, like Milton Erickson’s work, has a lot to contribute to saying how we can work creatively to use conflict as an important basis for learning and development.

A: A well-known Jungian psychotherapist, Aldo Carotenuto, wrote a book titled Amare tradire (“Loving Betraying”) (27) – where he says that to develop as a human being, betrayal is a crucial, inevitable part of your life: you have to betray your parents, society, a lot of fixed rules. So conflict and betrayal too, are part of a life worth living.

S: Yes, absolutely, and that word, of course, like any important word, has many, many different meanings. Milton Erickson used to say that to do good therapeutic work, you have to violate a lot of social rules. And he wasn’t saying you can deliberately act unethically, or that you violate human beings, but there is a lot of social rules that are developed to “stay polite”, if you will, to stay at arm’s distance from one another – and in many contexts that is appropriate to navigate a day in social life, but when we are doing work, we have to go deeper than that, and we have to violate those play rules that keep us at arm’s distance from each other, that keep us communicating through what we might call the normal, social masks, if you will.

But I think that to be a human being is to be deeply wounded, that none of us goes through life without being deeply wounded, and these wounds, just like the conflicts, or the betrayals, can be openings to a deeper humanness, but it takes skill to do that. And what I see my work is, is a way to try to deepen the skill-base, so that the inevitable suffering of life – whether it be conflict, or betrayal, or wounding – can contribute to our development to become better people, rather than
lead us to these what I called neuro-muscular locks, where we shut down and we got locked in anger, fear or dissociation, as a result of these betrayals or these conflicts.

And the thing about human beings, is we can shut down and we can stay shut down for the rest of our life – it is a rather unique ability that humans have. All animals can shut down, all animals go into what I call in the *Generative Trance* book, the “trauma trance”, but we humans have the capacity to shut down, and stay shut down, and then to sort of live life from that point of view of a disconnected state. But what we can do, and when I see people like Ueshiba’s work and Erickson’s work are really showing, is that we can take these conflicts or these problems as opportunities to move to a higher level of human consciousness.

A: Today, many trends in psychology emphasize the goal of being happy, successful, satisfied, almost sending a message that being sad or conflictual is a sort of flaw that has to be overcome. Is there also a positive message hidden in suffering or limitations? Take for example many artists who have created great works out of their personal difficulties – is your work different from some current trends, like positive psychology (28), for instance?

S: By and large, I think that positive psychology is doing some very good things, I think it is very good work, it has been an important correction to the history of psychology to singularly or primarily emphasize suffering. So, I am for it. I think that it can become as limited as the approaches that it was reacting against; in the United States we have a whole long tradition of positive psychology, “think positive”, from Norman Vincent Peale (29) all the way up to Tony Robbins (30), “if you just think positive you can create anything” – and again, I think there’s some merits to that, and I think, by and large, people do get too lost in their ego and their suffering. If you had to
make a choice between positive psychology and analyzing suffering, I would pick positive psychology.

But I think that there is a third, middle way, what the Buddhist would call a middle way (31), that is deeper and more inclusive, that is able to make positive use of both the joy of life on one hand, and the inevitable suffering of life. And there are ways to deal with the suffering of life, without getting caught in it, without getting lost in it. In the middle way of Buddhism, there is an emphasis on what is called equanimity (I believe we previously touched upon it in our discussions), and in the work that I do, that is what centering is important for. Centering allows you to be with joy and be with suffering without getting lost in either of them, so to speak. It allows you to deal with each of these important parts of human experience, in a similar way.

So, I like positive psychology, but it can easily become as imbalanced as “negative” psychology.

A: You were talking before about your book and your beginnings. Has your work and your way of doing therapy changed in these recent years? What are the developments in your work?

S: Well, as you know, the Generative Trance book just came out, and that is my answer! In many ways, the main focus on what I am now, is the cultivation of creative consciousness, and creative consciousness is not seen as an internal or an external state, but it is seen as the integration of what we might call this archetype of collective intelligence, and how to hook it to individual self-awareness, in a way that allows the collective consciousness (which has wisdom, but maybe it doesn’t have generativity, we might say that the collective unconscious really seeks to have a balance in consciousness and a balance in activities) but the collective unconscious doesn’t really change that fast. It’s like nature. You know, nature and the unconscious really are not interested in rapid change. The night becomes day and
the day becomes night, it is more of a balancing approach. From that point of view, people like Jung would say that the unconscious is always compensatory, it is trying to balance, it is trying to bring wholeness to the imbalance of the conscious ego positions.

I think what the notion of generative self is looking to do, is it is looking at the conditions under which consciousness can be really truly creative, can be truly generative, and still be balanced at the same time. I don’t know if we touched upon this before, but there is a notion in generative trance, of what it might mean to take these two parts of human consciousness, which is, on the one hand, the individual capacity for self-awareness, which allows us to change very rapidly, but in a way that has created tremendous imbalance, disconnection and dissociation: that has been the unfortunate side effect of self-awareness, we do it in a way where we disconnect from the wholeness of life, where our consciousness is no longer connected to nature, or no longer connected to otherness.

So, this disconnection from nature leads to technology, that is very insensitive to nature and it is destroying nature in the process. This sort of an isolated position of self-awareness, also leads to a disconnection from other points of view, other cultures, other religions, other perspectives. It allows a certain type of violence, towards these different positions. What is a good corrective to that is collective consciousness, which allows a sense of the feeling to the wholeness of the field and a sense of the balance to the field.

What collective consciousness does not have, is generatively – as I say, nature and the unconscious are good examples of working towards a harmony and a balance – but it doesn’t go beyond itself, so much. So, I think the challenge of our times is how to integrate these two great orders of consciousness: the self-awareness of the conscious mind, which, as I said, is able to imagine things, create things and begin to go beyond the past and the present, along with the balance and connection to the field as a whole that the unconscious is able to do.
This intersection and this integration is what I think creative consciousness is. Not creative unconscious, but creative consciousness.

A: I would like to talk about the work on dreams – in psychotherapy, traditionally dreams are considered important as a door to the unconscious. Do you use them, do you work with them, and what is their importance, in your view?

S: There is a number of questions that I hear you are asking. One is, do I individually work with dreams a lot? and the answer to that is no, not so much. I think that the reason for that is just more individual, I think that each person has their own aesthetic appreciation of a best modality for working. So I have worked with trance more than anything else and I have worked with ritual a lot. Other people might find a stronger affinity to working with dance, or working with dreams, working with music – I think these are all different modalities, if you will, for working with the unconscious.

If I was working with dreams, I think you would have again the same sort of challenges and issues, in my view, that I was just identifying. First of all, I think that most people would agree that there are different levels of dreams and different types of dreams – Joseph Campbell used to say that a lot of dreams might be seen as ways to integrate a day's activities, so that the unconscious mind might be able to review what has happened in the recent past and try to establish a unity about them, so there is a sort of consolidating, if you will, what has happened in the outside world. A second type of dream is a corrective dream, in the same way that symptoms are correctives that a person is perceiving from a particular ego-point of view. If that ego-point of view gets too far imbalanced, from an overall wholeness, then a dream, or a symptom, as in Jung's point of view, is compensatory. It is an attempt to try to bring a balance to what has been imbalanced.
There is a third type of dream, I think that occasionally occur as a sort of trans-personal, creative breakthroughs of sorts, and they are like other types of trans-personal events, they don’t occur often, but when they do occur, they feel very, very special. I can remember, and I think that most people can remember certain dreams that occur, that will be probably remembered for the rest of a person’s life. There is a handful of dreams that I have had, that are absolutely remarkable to me. And they seemed more than just personal dreams, but they seemed far beyond that.

I remember a dream, for example, when I was younger, where I was in this dream and I was inside of something, like a bubble (did I mention this dream to you?) and I was inside of this bubble, and it was opaque, and I was struggling inside of it, but I could not see beyond the bubble. And then something happened in the dream, things became very quiet and still, and all of a sudden I could see I was inside of this bubble and suddenly it became translucent, and as far as I could see, there were all these other people, and everybody was inside their own bubble, but whereas my bubble all of a sudden became translucent, everybody else’s bubble, as far as I could see, was opaque, and they were all inside their own opaque bubble.

As I saw that, all of a sudden something very extraordinary happened, which is, I could feel something was breathing, something was moving, something was holding all of these different bubbles, and breathing through them – and I was just absolutely shocked, then I realized that these bubbles were all individual cells in this greater body of something, that was the body of God, and they were cells in this extraordinary, extraordinary body of God, whose shape and form were too fast to really apprehend from my individual perspective inside of one of these cells. But I realized that it was one of the most extraordinary things I ever experienced. That’s an example I make of a trans-personal dream.

I have returned to that dream in different occasions, as a metaphor that I suspect that I will be unpacking and learning from, if I am willing,
over the course of my whole life: that we are all absorbed in our own individual, personal bubbles, but we are also part of this greater trans-personal body, that is growing – like God is growing.

You know, other people have commented on the fact that if you look at the Bible, you see this extraordinary growth of God over the course of the books of the Bible. God starts very emotionally “immature”, if you will, and grows over the course of time. Many people have pointed out that God needs man, as much as man needs God, both are involved in, at least the archetypal image of God, both in a growth as much the archetypal image of human beings is involved in an important growth. So, dreams can sometimes be reflections of the trans-personal growth, spiritual, of both God and human beings.

As I was beginning, you can say that a dream is one form, and music is another form, and trance is another form, through which human consciousness is organizing itself, and it is growing, and healing, and changing, and occasionally going through this burst into a higher level.

Just like it is important to see about a human life, it goes through developmentally these births and deaths and reorganizations. So it is important to see that there are multiple levels at which consciousness is operating always, and dreams are one form by which we can see that happening.

A: Is poetry too a part of this discussion? Because you give a privileged space to poetry, from every culture and age, from Eliot to Rumi, from contemporary American poets to Rilke. When did you discover the power of poetry for your therapy work, when was it born in you?

S: Me? High school. I took a class in high school on poetry, and it was an extraordinary awakening for me, but I would again say that a poem is like a trance, is like a dream, is like a psychotherapy: they are different modalities, by which this awakening of consciousness can occur. None is superior to the other, I think, they are different vehicles that are coexisting.
A: So poetry or dreams are some of the ways to connect to unconscious mind and its resources. However, many people still view this connection to the unconscious mind as potentially dangerous or scary. In your view, is that only a cultural prejudice, or are there other reasons?

S: I would say a mixture of both... but, you know, everything is dangerous. I don’t say that in a paranoid way, but anything that has complexity, and consciousness has the possibility to lead in some difficult places, that is why it's so important to stay awake, if you will, to have traditions and approaches by which you can be able to move through these experiences with a reasonable sense of safety. But again, I would say, there is no way to eliminate the danger of life, and the more interesting the challenge, the more interesting the life that we want to live, the greater the dangers are to get into trouble. All the more reason to make sure that one stays awake and aware and attentive during any particular journey.

With that as a backdrop, I would also point out that it is dangerous to not have a connection to the unconscious. We need to raise the question, “What are the choices, what are the alternatives?” and I think that to live away from the unconscious is a sure-fire way to create massive problems, to have a dissociation from our deeper intelligence. It is not to say that we are no longer free of its influence, but actually that we are going to be downed by negative influences with it.

An obvious example of this is what in the West is called the mind-body problem, the mind-body split, which is sort of a functional separation between the self-awareness of the ego mind and the unconscious awareness of the more primitive mind. I think we have already talked, to some degree, about this problem, and the inevitable negative consequences of it. So, having said that — that life is dangerous, that anything is dangerous, that to not have a relationship with the unconscious is probably the sure-fire way to have only negative
outcomes, then we can say that of course there is some danger and we need to be careful.

That is one point. The second point, and I believe that we touched on this in earlier conversations, I think it is important to emphasize that there is no fixed, independent, singular unconscious mind. I believe I was touching upon the fact that a simple cursory look at the nature of the unconscious will reveal that there are so many, many different unconscious minds. Freud looked into the unconscious and he saw this, basically, repression, a dark-seething cauldron of sex and violence, and similar to, I think, what conservative Christianity sees when they see the devil and getting lost in the heathenism, if you would “release from your ego control” for a moment. But, on the other hand, you have people like Carl G. Jung who saw a totally different unconscious mind, one filled with these archetypal presences and all this tremendous wisdom. Milton Erickson had also a positive view of the unconscious: he saw it as a “vast reservoir of experiential learnings”, and this is similar, interestingly, to the Buddhist psychological idea of the unconscious, which they also say it is a vast storehouse of experiential learnings.

So, if you look historically at the nature of the unconscious, you see that you would be wrong to talk about it in the singular. Basically, I think what those multitudes of different views reflect, is that there is no innate, independent unconscious mind, just as it there is no innate, independent conscious mind: it is a construction. To be sure, these constructions may develop over many, many years, they may be part of a tradition that spans hundreds of years. So, after hundreds of years of these constructions, you begin to think, “This is the way it always has been, it’s there independently”, but I think more it is really a construction that has been in play for a long period of time. Once something is constructed and it becomes conditioned as a part of consciousness, it will recreate itself automatically without any conscious awareness. We subjectively feel that it is happening independently of an observing consciousness that is ourselves, but in
fact, it is not. It is being constructed by us, but it is being constructed at some point automatically, without conscious awareness by us. So it becomes an important ethical and psychological question to explore what are the constructions of the unconscious mind, and for that matter, one of the constructions of the conscious mind that would be most helpful and most humane to human development. This is really what I am trying to do in my work.

A: Are you talking about constructions that are the effect of many, many years and centuries of human development? Do you mean both the constructions of the individual unconscious mind and those of a wider collective experience, developing in ourselves like two parallel processes that are going on?

S: Yes, I would not call them parallel, I would call them embedded, because the social and the family constructions are of a deeper order. Our personal mind is embedded within these deeper, wider minds of our family, our culture, our species. And I would say that each of these levels of mind does have this sort of default value, which is to say, once a pattern becomes conditioned, once you start constructing it in a particular way, it becomes the default value, which is to say that, if nothing else happens, in your consciousness, that version of consciousness will be recreated again.

It could be hundreds of years, as are many patterns. We have our Western consciousness and it’s hundreds and hundreds of years in the making, but it could be something you learned last week, for that matter. If you experienced a trauma, even a minor trauma, last week, that may be conditioning your consciousness: if you get bit by a spider or something, last week, and it got you into what I called a neuromuscular lock, which is to say, you went into some sort of “freezing”, lost in this negative experience, then the next time you see a spider, you are going to respond in the same way. That same learning that occurred a week ago, is going to automatically come into play. So, some conditioning is very recent and some is hundreds of years old.
A: The way you are describing this living process, made of multiple layers of experiences, both individual and collective, leads to a sort of vertigo, because, at the end of the day, one is tempted to ask: “Where am I?” I mean, we are the sum of these contents, but that is constantly changing, overlapping, modifying... From a Buddhist perspective, this makes sense because they say that ultimately there is no “I”, no self. But this could also be a destabilizing thought. So, where is some ground to stand on?

S: You say there are different levels, and I agree with the Buddhist perspective, that there is no ground, and there is a psychological need for stability. You have this sort of double-sided experience where there is no fixed ground, but you need some sense of stability, in order to continue to act and to experience things in some sort of coherent way: here is where I think different models of truth become very, very important. And traditionally, in the West, you have an empirical, sort of Aristotelian logic, which says that there is a single truth, and in Aristotelian logic, one of the most important laws is called the law of the excluded middle, and what it says, is something cannot be true and not true at the same time. This has been a foundation for Western thought, and has given us what I was referring to as a left-hemisphere, technologically oriented, linear, practical way of proceeding in the world. And it has immense value, but it doesn’t have a complete value for a whole consciousness. There are alternative logics, for example what is called the tetralemma, which interestingly developed a little before Aristotle, in the early Greek times, it was developed in India and has become a very significant part of Tibetan Buddhism. The tetralemma is looking at the multiple truth-values of a given statement on a deeper level, not so much at an empirical level, but at which you might call as a psychological or even spiritual level.

The tetralemma has these four “horns” if you will: “lemma” is a horn, one of the four sides, four truths of something, which is: it’s true, it’s not true, it’s both true and not true and is neither true nor not true. Those are the four values of the tetralemma.
So, to live live with both a groundedness and a freedom, to be able to have, at some level, a sense of stability, namely, “I am here and I exist”, and another level, which is, “I am part of a great field of consciousness”, that includes many contradictory perspectives simultaneously, I need to have an additional truth value at the same time, for example, “I am not here”, which is, I think, what you were alluding to with the Buddhist notion of no self. And of course, within Buddhism there are multiple perspectives. Practically, what they are trying to say is that there is no fixed, independent notion of a self, that anything you could say about anything is always part of an inter-being, is part of a set of relationships, and anything within that set of relationships arises mutually – what they call “mutually arising reality”: because of that field of relationships, you would not be you, if you didn’t have a whole field of relationships. So you are who you are because you have some presence within a larger field of relationships.

I think we need, at this point in our evolution, to be able to hold multiple contradictory truths simultaneously, and I believe that is possible to do that and still have a grounded sense of, “I am here and right now this is the world that I perceive”, but at the same time, have the capacity to not be so rigidly set in a fixed notion of who I am or what the world is, that I can be able to entertain other points of view and other realities, and other truths at the same time.

I think it is probably the only viable way that we are going to survive as species. You see that at multiple levels, one of the most obvious is, it used to be that you could hold the in-groups truth. That could be your culture. Usually you don’t have to interact outside your culture: for example, if you live in some part of Italy, your whole truth is within that scope, pretty much, you didn’t really have to deal with it. But now, I am sitting here in Southern California, you are sitting in Italy, and we have these different tribes, if you will – and it’s two of many, many different tribes. We all have different versions of the truth, each of those versions is important, I am not saying that to be a world citizen you have to give up being Italian or should, or give up being an American: is
that we need to honour those but we need to also appreciate that they are part of a larger field. This double description, or double level, I think is absolutely crucial and it allows us to have a sense of stability, but also requires us to have a sense that the stability is only at one level.

I should say we are getting back to the notion of the unconscious; I think we might have talked about, Carl G. Jung talked about these two different orders of consciousness: one he called pleroma and the other he called creatura. I think that they roughly correspond to the notion of the unconscious and the conscious mind.

In the pleroma, as in the unconscious, nothing is separate from anything else, everything is part of a field of relationships, we already talked about this: so non-human animals, they basically operate in terms of balance, trying to create and maintain balance in the larger system. There is an organismic balance: I am hungry, I eat; I am tired, I sleep etc. But they are also part of a larger balance, of trying to keep nature as a whole, and in the unconscious, the thought that it is separate from the whole is not possible.

I think that is what happens in the conscious mind, or what Jung called the creatura: here now you have this beginning of self-awareness of the ego mind. In this ego mind all of a sudden you have a sense of the separate self. This is in the Genesis story, when all of a sudden Adam and Eve finding themselves naked feel a sense of embarrassment or guilt, and that comes from ego awareness, you know, the bite on the apple is the emergence of ego awareness. All of a sudden there is a sense of, “I have a self-awareness of myself”, and that is where the notion of “I am a separate being” comes into play. I think that we have talked about that: at this level you can have these representations of an individual that is not connected to anything else, this is where the mind-body comes into play, this is all of a sudden when human beings can think and feel themselves without feeling what is outside of themselves, “I can feel myself but I don’t feel you”, and this gives rise to
all the pathologies of human beings, all the disconnections, all the sadism, all the cruelty that you don’t see rampant in other animals, besides human beings.

So, again that is also the basis for the extraordinary parts of human beings, all the creativity, all the possibilities, the ability to transcend nature. But this is also the basis of all the pathologies. What I see as our great challenge is to unite those two worlds: the unconscious world, where everything is interconnected and the conscious world, where things are self-aware, but separate, into this third level of what I called generative consciousness. And to do that, you absolutely need to have the willingness and the skill to be able to explore both worlds.

A: Thinking about what you have just said, I have always wondered about the different responses of people: some lose themselves in front of the inevitable difficulties and ordeals of life and they become addicted, alcoholic or suicidal — others, instead, experience similar obstacles and challenges, and seem to grow even stronger and wiser. Leaving aside all religious or spiritual perspectives, and based on your experience as a therapist, what is that can save or lose a person’s life?

S: It’s the great question! Some talk about it in terms of resiliency, some in terms of positive thinking, but I don’t know if it is a question that can be answered, even though it is a question that we should be asking frequently.

You know, I think many of the discussions about free will are now in a different version in terms of positive psychology, are related to this question, “How it is it that the same thing, the same experience can happen to two different people and they can have diametrically opposed responses?” And I think, as with most of the great questions, that the answer is complex. Some are probably just temperamental or characterological, some people are just naturally more positive and
more resilient, some people are really, really determined. Erickson
used to say that the most important issue of all, in therapy, is
motivation, is defining where a person's, a patient's motivation is,
because upon that rock you shall build your trance or your therapy.
That is where you are going to get people to take the action or to have
the courage to be able to make the positive changes in their life.

I think what the question obviously reflects again is that reality is
constructed, so the old behaviourist notion that you have a stimulus
and it creates the same response in each person is absolutely
ridiculous. This has been replaced by the cognitive revolution that
began in the Sixties, where you have got the stimulus and it goes into
what used to be called the “black box” of inner consciousness. And that
is something that happens in what used to be called the black box, that
determines the response that occurs. So, whatever is happening in the
inner consciousness is obviously quite variable, and some people they
will translate an experience into a belief and into a response that says,
“This just proves that life is hopeless, that I should give up”. Whereas
the same experience can translate into exactly the opposite for another
person. What obviously becomes important, is the psychological study
of what are some of those inner conditions that create a more positive
response and to what extent are they trainable, in the culture as a
whole, in children and in individuals, when we do coaching and
therapy. What can we do to help a person build a more positive way of
being able to receive whatever life gives them, as in every life you are
going to have significantly negative experiences, we just take that as a
given, there is nothing that can protect you from that, but in the
constructivist view, there is no innate meaning in any of these
experiences, that we create the meaning. And so, therefore, it becomes
an important area of study how can consciousness be trained, to be
able to interpret and respond and create positive, helpful meanings
out of whatever life gives you.
A: Before, you have talked about children. In your view, what are their most delicate parts, that we should respect, and in which ways can we help them to grow with the resources you were talking about?

S: That is such a big question! You see, obviously kids grow up in the same family and create very, very different lives. In my own family, every one of my siblings have very, very different lives, even though we went through the same childhood experiences.

With that in mind, at the same time you can say that obviously the more positive one-on-one experiences that a child has, the better. I am thinking of the research in social psychology or developmental psychology, that shows that kids growing up in very difficult environments, in great poverty, in areas of crime and low education, what the research shows, if they have one person, one adult who has a very positive, caring relationship with that child, that is the single greatest thing that can make a difference in that child’s life, in terms of being able to help them to move out of those negative circumstances and develop a positive human life.

So, there is no replacement, I think, for significant human relationships with children. We are talking about these different levels of mind, an individual mind, and a family mind, and a cultural mind, and a social mind etcetera, and we are also talking about that one of the great challenges that keeps an ego, an individual mind, part of a larger, collective mind. It’s when the ego mind gets isolated and separated that it becomes negative and pathological – I think we talked about that somewhere in our conversations – so, bonding with a child as a way to help that child’s consciousness become part of a caring, positive, human larger field, there is no substitute for it. There is research that shows one caring person that develops a positive, meaningful relationship with the child, that is the single most influential factor in that child’s life in terms of developing a positive human life.

So, I think, probably more important than defining the specific technical things is to say that, if there are members of that child’s
family, or larger society, teachers or other adults, that really do take a
positive ongoing interest in that child’s life, not to just try to force them
into following some behavioral program, but a genuine interest in “I
see you”, “I see your spirit”, “I send love and blessings and support to
the uniqueness of your human spirit and I care about you and there are
presences in this world that really care about you”, I think that is
probably the most important thing that we can emphasize.

A: It is very comforting to hear that, because as parents we often think we
make many mistakes, and we worry about many things we have done in good
faith but probably were not right...

S: All of us, as parents, are failures! You probably know Winnicott (32),
the great British object-relations guy, who talked about the “good
enough mother”. I think it is a very important notion, and I have used it
with people a lot, not only a “good enough mother”, but a good enough
daughter, or son, person, because none of us succeeds perfectly, and in
our most important relationships, our own failures and shortcomings
become most obvious. We need to be able to accept our significant
shortcomings and failures, as husbands, wives, parents, daughters,
sons, friends… But to appreciate that, we really can have a commitment
to do, is to be “good enough”. I think kids really appreciate that, and
once we get out of our anxiety thinking, “If I do one thing wrong, my
child will be terribly damaged forever”, is to appreciate that kids don’t
need perfect parents, and they don’t want perfect parents. They just
want somebody who will consistently offer love and understanding,
with a reasonable consistency. And, having said that, getting back to
this idea of free will, there still will be kids who don’t turn out very
well.

Again, when you have families with multiple kids, you see that very
obviously, that kids can grow up in roughly the same environment,
with the same parenting and turn out quite differently. This notion of
free will is a very, very important one, and there are many different
versions of it, obviously, but I think it remains as the sense that each person has a moral, ethical, psychological, spiritual responsibility for their own life, that ultimately you cannot give responsibility for your life to anything but yourself. Hopefully we can create conditions where is easier for people to appreciate that.

This is “both/and” logic, to me it is so apparent in these areas; we are talking about children, but you could say that more generally, that offering love to a person makes difference. But we can also say that ultimately, it is not enough.

You see that as a therapist, very obviously, a therapist or coach has this longing: if my compassion, and love, could take away your suffering, I would really like to do that, and then you realize that I can offer you my love, but I cannot take away your suffering, I cannot heal you, you are going to have to do that for yourself

I think that everybody who is in the helping professions has to confront this difficult truth at one point. When we are younger, especially children, we think that “My love will take away my parents’, my family’s suffering”, that “I love my family so much, that I will give my love and I will devote myself to giving my love so deeply, that mummy and daddy will be happy, and then we’ll all be happy” – and those who seriously believe that, then become therapists!

Then we get into relationships or marriages, where we think: “My role is to be so loving to my partner that I will relieve their suffering”, and then I think that virtually all of us have to face this painful truth, that I offer you my love, but I cannot heal you, I cannot take away your pain. But our connection, hopefully, can offer you a place where it is easier for you to do that for yourself. But I cannot do that for you. So, that is again one of those double, “both/and”, truths: love heals, but my love cannot heal you.
A: They teach that even the Buddhas cannot wash away suffering for others, and that not even the Buddhas can save others—each one has to save himself or herself. And still, they teach that sometimes the Buddhas cry seeing the suffering and the difficulty of emptying the cycle of suffering of beings. What have you developed for yourself, as a therapist and as a human being, to stay with that in a balanced way, in order not to be carried away or overwhelmed by your clients’ pain?

S: You know, the book that I published in 1997 is called *The Courage to Love*, and one of the main interests in that book was talking about love not as a sentimental, passive thing, not as something to merge with somebody and somehow take away their suffering, but that love should more properly be thought of as a skill, and as a skill of being with somebody, or some part of human experience, in a way that would be able to transform it. So, that really is the whole core question of Self-relations approach, that was developed in that book, which is how can love be thought of as a skill, as the highest skill, and how can it be explored and practiced as a transformational process.

You were just talking about the Buddhas, and one of the major differences, one of the things that J. Campbell talks about, is the major difference between the West and the East: in the West, we talk about Christ consciousness primarily in terms of the historical figure of Jesus, so we really talk about the external person who embodied Christ consciousness, namely Jesus—and it is heresy to think that you have Christ consciousness, or that I have Christ consciousness, within traditional Western religious framework. In the East, however, the mythological or spiritual inner dimension of the Buddha is what has been most emphasized. So the Gautama Buddha, the historical figure, is thought of as quite secondary. The Buddha is not this guy who lived 2,500 years ago, but it is the awakened heart—heart-mind—that is within each of us. The journey is to realize that you are the Buddha, if you will. We are so engrained in the West to have a knee-jerk response to that heresy, but I think that it is much more helpful to think that these higher levels of consciousness that were embodied by some of
these great beings, like Jesus and the Gautama Buddha, that each of us has the capacity, in some way, to be able to find that within ourselves, and that is where the great healing and transformation occurs. I don’t have to say, “I am Christ consciousness, I am Buddha consciousness to do this” and certainly the work that I have developed doesn’t represent that, it is not in any religious framework or even an explicitly spiritual framework, for that matter. It talks about it in terms of the creative consciousness that is immanent within each of us and which can be developed within each of us.

With that as a contextual background, you asked me a personal question: think of what I was just alluding to, there is this developmental shift, for each of us to become an adult, in which we have to really appreciate that my wholeness is not dependent on you loving me – I think that is really at the core of suffering in seeing other people suffering, or this getting stuck in the suffering of seeing other people suffering. From a child’s point of view, if their family is suffering, then that child cannot be whole, or cannot find their own self-love, without the family being able to help them. To a child, “I need my mummy and my daddy in order for me to be whole, I absolutely need it, I can’t differentiate”. As an adult, we have this ability to find the tone of human self-awareness within ourselves. You know, the tone of the I-position and the other-position, mummy and I, for example. We need it, in terms of interpersonal relationship, we still need it, but in a different way, as an adult. We don’t absolutely require it unconditionally, in order to find our own wholeness of creative consciousness within.

So, I think, when we do this work as therapists, when we do this work in intimacy as partners, it really requires us to grow up and to have this sense that, “I can feel my wholeness without needing you to unconditionally reflect me”, in that way I can be with you when you are not willing or able to unconditionally love me, and still be OK. I can be with you when you are upset or when you are dissociated or when
You’re disconnected, and I don’t need you to be whole, in order for me to feel whole within myself.

You know, it is a very complex relationship, because again we have these contradictions in it, all the way through. I am not talking about me being totally separate from you, to have a sense of, “I don’t care what you’re doing, I’m not affected by what you’re doing”, because those are untrue. But I can compassionately be connected with you when you are suffering, without losing my wholeness. This is a skill, nobody perfects this skill, I don’t think; we are all learning it every day, some days are better than others, some moments are better than others. I can be talking to you about it right now and sound like I perfectly mastered it, but I know that ten minutes from now, I could be talking to my daughter, or to my wife, and I will lose it, and their upset will trigger my upset.

So, we are not talking about this perfect condition that is there a hundred per cent of the time, but talking about this capacity to know that my first obligation is to connect with myself, and then to extend that to you. And when I can do that, I am in a much better position to love myself and to love you, no matter what else is happening. And I have to accept that I forget to do that, and so it is a practice that we are doing every day.

So, the second part of my response is that to be able to have more access to that, I need to be doing my daily practices, these daily practices about consciously and mindfully sensing those parts of myself that need love and being able to nurture a connection with them, in the same way that I always longed for somebody else to be able to do that, you know, my mother, my father, my family, and then later my intimate relationships, my wife or my husband, my partner—and to realize that part of me as a child that was always requiring it from somebody else, I have to practice being able to do that for myself, and as a condition for mature love with other people. Even in professional relationships, you know, therapist-client or whatever they be, personal relationships of intimacy.
A: This sounds like the core skill we need to develop, the ability and the strength to give to ourselves what we were expecting others to give to us. Knowing it, working on ourselves with personal practices is very important, and what else can we do?

S: It is a great process to do it. There is the ancient Western injunction, “Know thyself”, from Delphi, one of the most important sites of the First millennium in Greece – it is a Greek saying, as you would expect. Self-mastery and self-knowledge is an injunction that has been around for centuries, and the pathways to doing that are multiple. I would never tell somebody, “This is the pathway that you should follow in order to know thyself”, to know thyself is much more than a merely intellectual process, that is the first thing we have to break through in terms of our contemporary sense of knowledge as being primarily or singularly intellectual.

That is where some of these traditions, like meditation, or prayer, or any aesthetic practice for that matter: through music or art, through reading, through connecting to nature... I think the important thing is to, in Joseph Campbell’s similar injunction, “follow your bliss”, which of course so many people misunderstood as “just go with whatever feels good”, but he was not talking about that, is just to notice when you feel this deeper connection with yourself and with the world, and make that a practice.

Freud just talked about the two pillars of the good life, as work and love, and love could mean family, basically finding personal love in your life, and then finding meaningful work by which you can contribute to the larger good. But I really think there are three pillars, and the third pillar, in addition to work and love, is personal practices. To the old, to these sort of Renaissance notions, I think this was appreciated, that self-knowledge and self-development was absolutely indispensable to being a complete person, or to be a person in any meaningful sense of the term. I think personal practices are very, very
important, they are indispensable, cultivating this language that is beyond intellectual, or this attention that is beyond the constant barrage of stimuli that calls us into the external material world, you know, television or the internet or gossip or many responsibilities that we face throughout the day. We need to know on a daily basis that there is a deeper language that is this inner language. And there are many, many ways of doing that.

With all my clients I have this discussion, and of course ninety-nine percent of people say, “I really agree with you, but I don’t have the time. If I had time, I’d be able to do this, I really agree that is very important”. Really, at the end of this conversation, you will never, ever have time to do this, you will never have time for personal practice, it will never be given to you. And subjectively, you always seem that you have so much busy-ness in your life that you don’t have the time right now. So it is important to realize that you will never be given the time you have to take, and if once you do take it, I guarantee to my clients, you will actually have more time, because time is a very psychological experience, and therefore, if you are always in an action or busy-busy-busy mode, then the quality of your psychological experience will always be that it is too busy, it is unquiet, and once we claim it, even for twenty or thirty minutes a day, this commitment to cultivating this quiet language of self-awareness that changes our psychological space, which is the most important dimension of time, then we will have more time, because we will be more quiet, more fulfilled within ourselves, we will be able to get more done, and the quality of the work that we do will be much greater. And we will feel happier.

And also then, we will not have quite this obsessive need for other people to fulfill us, whether it be our clients getting better, or people telling us that they love us or whatever… of course, we all need that at some level, we all want that, that never goes away, but it doesn’t become absolutely essential a hundred percent of the time.
A: You are active in many trainings, all around the world, and I would like to ask you, what is more fulfilling for you, training groups or doing therapy with individual clients? And what are your motivations? I mean, what makes you say, “This is my bliss”?

S: Those are questions at different levels, so I will just say practically, I do still have a small private practice and when I am home I do one or two hours of session work a day, on average. I have been in my office for twenty-seven years, I live at the same place: my offices are in front of the property here. So, I have been seeing people here for twenty-seven years and once people are in, my door is open, I really would never turn people away. There are people that I have seen over twenty-seven years, who I may not see for five, ten or fifteen years, who call me up—in the United States there is a model of psychotherapy called brief intermittent psychotherapy, and I think it is a good model, that basically says for most people, they come in and they deal with sort of life issues that they are in process. So, maybe something is happening and there is a problem in their marriage, there is some problem in their life, and they come in, and they work for a while and hopefully they get through that problem, and they leave.

Maybe you see them for a couple of months, or maybe six months, but at some point, they are through their problem and they leave, and then maybe five years later they are going through a different sort of life problem and they are in a different part of their life, so they want to come back in, and for most people it is hard finding a good therapist, finding a therapist who they can trust and it’s a good fit for them, so I would never want to deprive a person of that! I might see a person, as I said, five or ten years later, because something else is happening in their life. Sometimes people are calling me that I have not seen for a while, so I will see them again, within that context. I have a handful of people that are long-term people: some of them are just people who like to come in and talk, and they are not in great, great crisis, and I used to feel a little guilty about it! I would say, “Hey, you don’t really seem to need it”, but they would say, “Yes, but I really like to talk to
you!" and just be able to talk of what is going on, that is very helpful. And so, I have some people like that and they are fine with me seeing them every month, or every two months or even longer.

I have a couple of people who are sort of long-term disabled people, they are sort of – how shall we say it? – sort of walking on the edge of society, they come in and we have discussions about how do they deal with certain challenges in their lives, that for most people would not be that challenging. Maybe they work in a job and they cannot deal with the office politics, they just cannot fathom them, they are just too much and they create all these crisis that would happen. I have a few people like that, I accepted any new clients for about three years. I would not answer a question about what do I find best in my life: I love all of my children!

A: So far, is there any topic which we have not touched upon, that you would like to speak about?

S: To me, creative consciousness is the core theme, and I hope that the interview could adequately emphasize that this presence of creative consciousness is really everywhere, it runs through every living presence, as it runs through that presence it moves through these filters, if you will, and depending on the nature of those filters, then there is an expression, an experience of creative consciousness. They are really two different things, one is creative consciousness, the other is the way it is experienced and expressed through the particular living being through which it is flowing. I think we emphasized filters a lot, this notion of filters like a stained-glass window that is transducing all these waves of creative consciousness that are not quite in physical time or space: so the brain is a filter, a person’s culture is a filter, the history is a filter – but you could also say that the structure of a plant is a filter, the structure of a social group of animals is a filter... so, I think it is important that the notion of a filter be appreciated in its general form, and then appreciate that there are multiple levels of filters that
are active in any living system at any given point. And that is where we are getting the patterns of consciousness, both the experience the way it is known within that system and also the expression of the way that it is transmitted from that system into the larger world as a whole.

A: I believe this is a key point of all these conversations, the idea that reality is constructed, and how we can work on our filters to create a different experience of reality.

S: And when we get into the filters, there is always this notion of these two different dimensions: one is the pattern of the filter itself, it is like some sort of frame of reference, some sort of map, if you will. But equally important is whatever the consciousness that is holding the filter, and this is really a very, very crucial point, because, for example, for human beings that consciousness can be in what I called a neuromuscular lock, and it can be basically in a place of mindlessness, so there is no real conscious awareness that is present within the filter. So that, basically, the way that the filter has been used before, will basically be used in the same way again, it is all automatic, and when we confront with problems, we see of course that there is always a repetition of a negative pattern, of an undesirable pattern, we said that is one of the simplest definitions of a problem. When we get into the question of how do we change or grow, how do we transform or how do we heal, then the second dimension, which is how these filters have been held by human consciousness, becomes really, really important. And that is where, to use a more contemporary term, at least in the Western approaches, the notion of mindfulness is so important. So that one can be aware of the patterns that one is participating in, but also with that mindful awareness to have that capacity to be able to shift the patterning of the filters, to allow for a new response. This of course is one of the great questions, for any sort of change, whether it is helping individuals change or helping cultures change, the notion of how to bring a mindful awareness to the patterns that are being used, and then to be able to maintain a certain mind-body state that allows
one to shift the patterns for a fundamental structure level. This is a skill and this is an art.

A: Is social self another filter?

S: Yes, absolutely. And there are also the family filters.

A: They can be very reassuring, they are like safety patterns for many people. How can we get out of that fixed pattern to find something bigger and something new? Because fear plays a major part in people’s life, and sometimes looking at things in depth is considered scary.

S: You know, there are two responses for that – the first is, most people and most systems are willing to change when the cost of not changing has exceeded the fear of changing. I just think that it tends to be part of human nature, that if things are more or less working, we don’t have a high motivation to change – not most people, and not most systems. So the problems and crisis that people experience, which give this feedback that what you are doing is not working, and once people have that information, there is almost always a continued attempt to try to make it work, even though you are getting feedback. And then, when the system really hits bottom, if you will, that it reaches a point where it creates so much suffering, to not change, then I think people generally become more willing to be able to adjust their fears. That is one thing. You will hope, however, that you could develop cultures where people have all the attitudes, and, perhaps even more importantly, the skills, to be able to identify and positively and skilfully face their fears every day. There is an old aikido book, written by Tom Crum, is called The Magic of Conflict (33), and he says in any sort of new learning, that conflict is a very typical early part of the new learning, when you start like a second-order learning, sort of a higher-level
learning. He says that conflict is almost invariably a part of that sequence, and if you could take the attitude, if you had the belief that the conflict, or the fear, is really a sign that I am on a threshold, I am on the edge of an important new learning, an important new discovery, then the aversion to fear and the shutting down around conflict, I think they would be lessened considerably.

I think there are signs that this is happening and of course when you see it, you hear it a lot from really, really creative people, is that they accept fear, and conflict and the so-called resistances as integral parts of any interesting change processes. So, it starts with a sort of belief or an attitude, I should say it starts with this commitment to live life as a journey, to have this commitment of wanting to continue to go beyond what your previous limits were, and understand that is the secret to happiness, is to continue to grow and continue to experience and participate in new ways. And then there is a sense that, “Well, if I do that I’m going to find myself up against a lot of limits”, and that is supposed to happen. And, third is that I have skills in my toolbox that I can use in practice on a daily basis, for how to identify when I am going into fear or to be able to not to get caught up in the automatic conditioned response to fear – that is where ideas about centering are so important, how to be able to reorganize one’s mind-body state, so that while fear is a part of it, it’s not a dominant or singular part of it; and then, how to have a way of creating successful responses to fear, that continue to give ones based on, “I can transform fear into positive learnings and positive resources”.

A: What advice could you give to people who are beginning their own Hero’s journey, leaving the comfortable village to face the wasteland and new paths?

S: Well, I think most people would say, “Find your bliss and follow it”, that term was used by J. Campbell, follow your bliss, and many people misunderstood this to mean that you just did whatever felt good, more of a hedonistic idea. But he really meant something quite different,
which is to notice when you feel a deeper connection to life, notice when there is at least a little bit of magic in the world for you, when you feel this state of wholeness, and well being and curiosity. And I think this is in every human life.

Now, the first part of the journey is hearing the call, because that is life calling you on this journey. The second part of the journey is, according to Campbell, the refusal of the call, which is you decide that it is too much, you cannot do it, or you get messages from the outside that this is not realistic, it is silly, you don't have what it takes and so forth and so on. So people think, “Well, the best I can hope for is to be in the village”, but I would question the idea about whether most people are truly happy in the village, whether they are truly happy living within this box of a fantasy ideal world, sort of a Walt Disney world. What I say in my new book, *Generative Trance*, is the village is sort of the idealized part of the system, but there is always the shadow world of the wasteland, that is intimately connected and so, somebody who says they live a perfect life, they usually should be really concerned about it! Because there is all this underbelly, there is all this shadow side of people's life. We see it all too often with public figures, they can be almost too good to be true, and then we find out that they have all this shadow world.

The village is for most people like a drug, in some ways: it promises you a lot, but it rarely delivers. I was just reading a statistic that on a worldwide basis, eighty per cent of people are not happy or fulfilled in their work. Four out of five people don’t find their work happy or fulfilling: that is amazing to me. That means that you don’t have to go too deep to find out that the wasteland is always there. What the journey represents, is the opportunity and the capacity to integrate these two sides, the light and the shadow, into a deeper and more real sort of life journey, where you can feel a connection to the light and the dark and find that, when you do so, there are these additional dimensions that you see present in every creative person’s life: in addition to the rational world, there is a connection to the magical,
imaginational world. I think we touched upon it, this notion of the world of opposites, is so central to creative consciousness. This is what the journey represents as a life path, this ability to live in a whole way, so that we are not dominated by cynicism, or fear, or depression, or grandiosity or whatever, but not only are we able to live our lives in a productive, responsible, creative way, we find that the magic of life can be present in the process, and again, I think, who we really should be looking to, is people who have achieved very creative lives, and use them as some significant reference points.

A: More and more often I see people living in a divided life syndrome: they have a social, professional self to which they stick to most of the time, and then they have some very original or courageous private passion, but you would never say they would do that, because they don’t bring anything of that “deep self” into their everyday activity. It looks to me as a waste of resources… what do you think?

S: I totally agree, and I hope that this type of work can help people sense that they can do that – one of my books is called Walking in Two Worlds (34) - they can walk in the two worlds, in some sense of integrated fashion. We need traditions, we need models, we need examples that it is possible, that there are ways by which people can do that. As an example, I knew since I was a little boy that I was going to be a psychologist, a psychotherapist, and, as I often said, you just had to take one look at my family and you know that somebody had to volunteer! but I didn’t know until the first time I met Milton Erickson, that I carried this rigid unconscious map in terms of image of what a responsible psychotherapist looked like. And in my situation, it was an American Freud, a white male, about fifty years old, beard, with a jacket with patches, smoking a pipe, and looking very emotionally constipated, very rigid – I thought that was how you had to be in order to be a responsible adult, and I really wanted to do that! And I met Erickson, who was as responsible as they come, he was a great master, had extraordinary achievement, and the first thing, he was wearing all
purple, he was this sort of a Yoda-like (35) character, with sparkling, twinkling eyes... Immediately, that unconscious image came flying out of my imagination and it shattered into a thousand pieces never to be put together again. This sense of, “Oh my God, I’ve been navigating by this map” that in order to be a good person as an adult (and most of us want to be good people, making positive contributions, being regarded as good-hearted and wanting to be a good citizen), that was my map. And Erickson, I am so happy that he was a teacher who accessed and gave me a very, very different possibility, namely, that the most important thing is that you have to be yourself. And you have to feel through the surface level of what being “socially polite” is.

Because if we just take ourselves as a good person, to be socially correct we usually are setting up a huge shadow, because our soul energy is not really integrated and participating in growing and changing. Without it, our soul energy can develop a sort of dark side, if you will. The point is it is possible but we need to have those examples and people speaking to it. There is no need for eighty per cent of working population to be unhappy at work. If you are unhappy, you are not really going to be creative, and you are not going to be anywhere near as productive."

If you look at something like the percentage of people who goes to medical doctors, up to seventy per cent are there for psychosomatic grievances, they have anxiety or they feel pains and most of the complaints that show up in a medical doctor’s office, are not primarily medical complaints. That is an example that if you just keep that at a social cognitive level, then the embodied experience, that is also connected to the collective consciousness, is not attended to, and it shuts down, becomes negative, etcetera. Part of the journey is to make sure that people have that full mind-body connection, and are able to use it in all walks of their life.
A: Do you also see that in young people? Do you have young people taking part in your workshops, I mean in their twenties or thirties? – what changes do you see in them?

S: By and large, one of the biggest concerns I have in a lot of countries that I am teaching is the lack of young people. But in some countries, like China, or like Russia, I see many more young people. I would say that my groups in China are the youngest, they are in their late twenties, thirties. At the same time, we have talked about some of the debilitating negative consequences of television, computers, texting and stuff like that – I believe that we talked about what it means to be in the isolated left hemisphere, disconnected from embodied feeling and if you have no connection to the embodied feeling, then you have no connection to the living world of consciousness. I am very concerned that the ever-increasing predominance of the technological world is isolating people and their consciousness, so that they don’t really sense a connection to living consciousness, they are in this virtual, isolated world, and in many ways, if they start so young, as kids do, they don’t really have a reference structure otherwise.

On the one hand, we always have to appreciate that the youth are the promise of the future, they are the great hope and I see some of that, but I see that because of this isolation and over-industrialization of consciousness, and the economic restructuring that is at a world level, so that there is less possibility of good paying jobs, for example – when I was coming out of university in the Seventies and Eighties, if you were industrious, if you were motivated, you would probably be able to get a good job. Now I see a lot of people in their twenties, they cannot get a good job, and of course, if you are in that environment, it is very, very discouraging.

So I hope that there are these traditions that are further developed about emphasizing the notion of life as a journey of consciousness. And, with all due respect, I think that the role that traditional religion used to play for the majority of lives is not fulfilling the needs for the majority of lives now. The need to introduce people to the mystery of
life, the sense that there are energies beyond the material world, that are at the heart of a creative life, of living a life with a deep sense of love, with feeling a connection with something greater than one’s ego intellect, that for most people traditional religion no longer works in that way. So there needs to be some sort of repatterning or reworking of the traditions by which people are called to live in the mystery and also live to a higher spiritual and ethical basis.

A: Then it sounds like until today, there is no younger student or heir, that is following in your footsteps as you did with Milton Erickson.

S: My generation of students came in Erickson’s when he was in his seventies and in some ways, that is more traditional, when it is a kind of last creative stage as a passing on to a new generation. I was just at the Brief Therapy Conference in San Francisco and basically, many of the leading people in the field were there, and there weren’t any younger people – I am talking about the faculty, the teachers. I would love to see some shining light among the teachers, really. And I am not totally discouraged, I think that there will be.

A: Would you like to have this kind of professional relationship, a student working with you, learning from you and getting your heritage?

S: It depends, there are an infinite number of possible ways that it could occur; of course I would love somebody that was very bright and motivated and understood the work and was able to bring it to a next level. I feel, especially now, that this work is really at the beginning stage. I think you know that Robert Dilts and I are forming this international Association for Generative Change, and it is reflecting that shift in my primary “home”, from psychotherapy to more creative change at much deeper, wider levels, and is not that the latter question, or area, has not been existing, but I started out in psychotherapy and now I feel that the best contributions I can make
are probably beyond psychotherapy, in terms of the cultivation of creative consciousness at multiple levels of society. So I am very excited about this form of collaboration with Robert, because I think we share a set of values and ideas, but at the same time we have complementary skills and understandings, and I think it could be a really good form for some creative development. I think we both look forward to creating these professional communities, where a new generation can really take this work even further.

A: So now are you offering your experience to all kinds of professionals, beyond people in the psychotherapy field, and those who are interested in studying psychology?

S: Absolutely. The term creative consciousness is not isolated to psychotherapy, far from it. Emphasizing that has been the basic principle; you see that every part of life requires creative consciousness to be healthy, to continue to grow, to continue to change, to be able to deal with the inevitable wounds, to new ways of responding, to new conditions, etcetera. Psychotherapy, for all its value, is probably too caught up in the negative questions, of “what’s the problem, what’s the suffering and what caused it” and how do you primarily focus on fixing the problem, whereas creative consciousness is recognizing problems, wounds and difficulties, as a very important but secondary part of creative life.

A: You have just mentioned the Brief Therapy Conference you have attended recently. What are the new directions in psychology today? Do you see any significant changes?

S: Yes, I see a couple; one is the technology for neuroscience study has developed so significantly that neuroscience is just exploding in terms of research and research areas that are very interesting and very, very helpful. There is always the danger that people would resort to a
reductionist view of neuroscience, that all your experience is caused by brain patterns, but I see that as one very interesting area. I see the second, and somewhat surprising, very encouraging, is the fairly rapid emergence of mindfulness as a crucial element to psychotherapy. I was on a panel on mind-body issues at the conference, and I was laughing saying that who would have ever predicted that mindfulness would be embraced with open arms by the cognitive behavioural world, which is usually very conscious-oriented, very linear, very rational?—but it has really become a central part of a number of cognitive behavioural approaches. So I see that, those two things, I see a return to attachment theory, because it has been a real development in the trauma fields and how people treat trauma. And I think that have been some really good developments in trauma treatment.

A: Could you say something more about attachment theory?

S: Attachment theory is about bonding, how you develop emotional bonding, traditionally initially with your mother, but with your family, so it is sort of the early experiences by which you emotionally bond with significant others, and in attachment theory it is sort of, like an early Freud developmental theory, that those attachment experiences create these maps that guide your future intimacy experiences about, for example, what intimacy looks like, what is an intimacy partner, is it OK to trust, what does it mean when somebody leaves, etcetera... these would all be part of attachment theory. Actually, I really like the trauma work, I like a lot of the specific methods that have developed in trauma, things that are more gentle, more effective, things like Peter Levine’s (36) work in somatic experiences, I think that’s very good. I get concerned that it gives primary emphasis to the trauma, as the basis for the construction of self, and of course with people who have significant trauma, this is a very central piece of their history and of their present relationships and so forth. But the biggest problem with problems is that they functionally isolate you from the larger field of your life, so when you experience a trauma or when you remember a
trauma you get so isolated in that trauma experience that you no longer have access to any of the experiences outside of that trauma.

This is what makes it a problem, is that you are no longer connected to the creative wholeness of your life. You think, “The hurt that I had when I was abused at five years old, that’s my core identity”, but, really, in each person’s life there’s so many different connections, maybe you are a five-year-old abused, but maybe you had times when you played, when you were six, or you had your favourite foods, or good books that you read or kind people, and we all are a matrix, we all are this system, this mandala of many, many different energies and experiences and so forth and so on. Creative consciousness only activates when we are connected to the whole of the matrix.

The problem with the problems is that we functionally isolate when we step into a problem, we don’t feel the connection to the parts of our life that are outside of the problem. For that reason I think that there is a danger in talking about trauma, that you begin to make it the primary description of a person’s life, and it’s a little bit like money or personal hygiene – I think we talked about that – if you ignore it, your life is unworkable, but if you put it in the first place, your life is unworkable. But I think that there are some interesting developments in psychotherapy. I think that in a certain way, in the States, the problem is the institution of psychotherapy, with the insurance companies, has made it very hard for therapists to be fully humane and creative, flexible. The study traditions, the medicalization of psychotherapy that developed from the beginning of psychotherapy, in order to make it legitimate, it medicalized, so you have a disease, a mental illness. And this is the worst type of the way you are thinking about problems, I think, you dehumanize it, you make it into a pejorative, negative presence. These are the strategies when you want to legitimize violence, the main strategies. Then when you have that medicalization, with the pathologizing of consciousness, is the economic industrial model of insurance companies. Then you get a very oppressive sort of context in which psychotherapy is situated, and that makes it difficult.
A: I understand that this model dictated by insurance companies is predominant in the United States—however, in Europe too the situation is not so different, since academical institutions can be rigid, and it is not easy for these new developments to spread and become known.

S: You know, part of the problem is the inevitable problem with what is the strongest—I mean, there is a lot of work showing that in the developmental history of any system, in the first part of a successful system you are open, you are the creative part, but once you get more into power, there is this pole to become more rigid, to become institutionalized. I saw that happen with Milton Erickson's work, I saw that happen in NLP, which started out with such creative spirits and then they have become sort of the official dogmatic version, that is just an element of human consciousness that we need to be always attentive to, and—who was it that said, “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and render unto God what is God’s”? Was that George Bush?! I believe it was Jesus… You know, psychotherapy and any people working with creative consciousness have to appreciate that the traditional geographical place for the healer or the transformer is at the edge of the village. You really have one foot in, and one foot out.

A: Like shamans?

S: Yes, like shamans, because you appreciate that once you get inside of the system there is always a conservative force inside it, that wants to control things, that wants to make things standardized, that wants to make them more predictable. This is just a part of human consciousness and it is easier, it is more comfortable, you can protect your turf better, you don’t have to change, etcetera. But we also know that, once you start accepting that, then your creativity dies, then you are no longer interested, what is usually the case at the beginning of the development, which is about creating something new.
You realize that once you are in midlife, there is a tremendous energetic pole to stay conservative, I think that is regardless of what the content of your position is, but if we do have this appreciation that creative consciousness is what we are trying to practice, then in the creative consciousness there is this strong sense of continue to open to new maps, continue to challenge your positions, to be skeptical that your map is the territory. This is the heart of all science and meditation, this healthy skepticism about whatever the mental position is, but even within those traditions you can have incredible fundamentalism. Science says you cannot ever prove anything is true, you just reject or accept something as not false, so of course science can get as rigid as any other endeavour, and meditation, spirituality, also.

A: So, until today, do you prefer to stay on the edge of the village?

S: Personally, yes, I think it is important for each person to sense what their deepest calling is, and where they are best situated in the field. I am not saying that is the best place for everybody, I see people like my friend Jeff Zeig (36) who runs the Erickson Foundation, I have tremendous admiration for him, he has contributed immensely, creating all these conferences, and I have said to him a number of times, “I admire what you do so much, I couldn’t do it, you know, the politics and the ego games and the negotiations, they are not something that’s my greater skill”. But other people, those are their best skills. I am just saying, there are many, many different places in the system and you have to find the place where you feel as most resonant for you, to grow personally, to be happy and to be able to make a contribution.

Whatever place that you are in, you have to appreciate what the Chinese call the principle of impermanence, that nothing is fixed, that everything is in a process of change and the moment you begin to try to make things permanent, is the moment that you are no longer in the
living world and you no longer have a connection to creative consciousness.

_A:_ You have had a very intense experience of life so far, what would you like to achieve next, what is your next goal, if you will?

_S:_ It depends on what level you are talking about, I live life as multiple dimensions, but I feel like I am at the very beginning of a new phase professionally, this work of bringing creative consciousness to a whole other level and I am committed and I pray that I have good health and good energy for another thirty years or so, because I think the best is yet to come!

I really feel that, as we get older we really can see that we don’t need to sweat for small things, all those things we were more worried about when we were younger – these things that a person has, “What if this happens and what if that happens…” I think maybe because our vibration slows down a little bit, we get a little bit closer to turtles than rabbits, that we can feel this more sensitive quality to living consciousness. I am really happy and look forward to life, I see it in terms of two things: one is continuing to develop the good practices of what to do that feeds a creative life and a happy life, and that is a practical, daily question: what do I do personally that feeds that, that supports and nurtures that, and secondly what are the negative practices that take me away from living in creative consciousness. This can be noticing what can be these sorts of demons, the enemies of creative consciousness, things like anger and fear and disconnection and numbness. Those are the versions of the “four F’s”, fight, flight, freeze and fold; those are, I think, the major enemies to living a happy, healthy life. So, to continue to clear out those states, what we were talking earlier, the mindless unconscious fears that we carry, the mindless resentments that we may participate in.
In the end it seems clear, when I am in my better self, that there is no value to them, they are ghost moments, at the end of my life, I am pretty sure I will look back and say those times, when I was living in fear, or anger, or in my head, I don’t have anything, any experience really to show for that. There is no living consciousness over there, so that is the sense of how it translates in those negative practices, how I spend each day, whether it be gossip or some mindless activities. So, the answer to your question is: I look forward to the best is yet to come, and realize that is part of a set of skills, commitments and practices.

A: That is also a work to do, it is not given to you like that – you have to work and be committed to it.

S: That's right.
Notes

1. Mais si l’on renonce à une part de ce qui est, il faut renoncer soi-même à être ; il faut donc renoncer à vivre ou à aimer autrement que par procuration. Il y a ainsi une volonté de vivre sans rien refuser de la vie qui est la vertu que j’honore le plus en ce monde. (…) Oui, il y a la beauté et il y a les humiliés. Quelles que soient le difficultés de l’enterprise, je voudrais n’être jamais infidèle, ni à l’une ni aux autres. Albert Camus, “Retour à Tipasa” (1952), in L’été, Gallimard, Paris 1959, 110-111. [English transl. by the editor]


5. L’ignorance reconnue, le refus du fanatisme, les bornes du monde et de l’homme, le visage aimé, la beauté enfin, voici le camp où nous rejoindrons les Grecs. D’une certaine manière, le sens de l’histoire de demain n’est pas celui qu’on croit. Il est dans la lutte entre la création et l’inquisition. Malgré le prix que coûteront aux artistes leurs mains vides, on peut espérer leur victoire. Une fois de plus, la philosophie des ténèbres se dissipera au-dessus de la mer éclatante. Albert Camus, “L’exil d’Hélène” (1948), in L’été, Gallimard, Paris 1959, 82-83. [English translation by the editor]

7. Black Panthers: the party was founded in Oakland, California in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. Their program aimed at defending afro-americans and minorities and to give a militant and revolutionary response to Martin Luther King’s non-violent movement.


11. PTSD, “post traumatic stress disorder”, is the definition for a series of symptoms that may follow a very serious experience on the psychological level, for example war events, natural catastrophes, physical abuse or accidents.

12. “Shell shock” was the term used for the psychopathological disorders that affected the soldiers of the First World war who were exposed to explosions and bombings. It was also called “war neurosis”.
13. Milton Hyland Erickson (1901-1980) was the psychiatrist who founded modern clinical hypnosis and had a strong influence on many therapy approaches, for example the systemic-strategic approach, brief therapy, family therapy.

14. Karl Dürckheim (1896-1988), German psychotherapist, lived in Japan from 1938 to the end of the Second World war and was one of the firsts Western practitioners of Zen.

15. Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), American writer and mythologist; his research about mythology and history of religions had a deep influence on modern culture.

16. DSM-IV, (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). The present version in use is the fourth revised edition, while the fifth edition is due in 2013.


18. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness [...]”, Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities.

19. The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education in Stanford University is dedicated to scientific study of altruistic behaviour, on
the basis of neuroscience, psychology and economics (www.ccare.stanford.edu). The Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education (www.dalailamacenter.org) is a secular, no profit organization which supports educational projects aimed to develop a culture of tolerance and awareness in the communities.

20. Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1910-1972), Austrian biologist and epysthemologist, was one of the founders of the general systems theory.


22. Gregory Bateson (1904-1980), English-born antropologist, sociologist, psychologist. In 1939 he moved to the United States and his works in the social, scientific, cibernetic, psychiatric field had an extraordinary cultural influence, particularly in the Sixties and Seventies.

23. Paul Watzlawick (1921-2007), Austrian-born psychologist and writer, was one of the most important members of the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto; he taught at Stanford University and his research inspired the systemic-strategic psychotherapy schools.

24. The joke here refers to two personal traits of Milton Erickson. He always dressed in purple, which was the only colour he could see, being colour-blind, and in old age he had to use a wheelchair, due to the polio he had suffered when he was seventeen.
25. Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969) developed in the early Forties the martial art of aikido (where ai means “harmony”, ki “spirit, energy” e do, “way, discipline”), integrating the principles of traditional Japanese and Chinese martial arts, creating a totally personal and original system.

26. Dojo in Japanese means the place where martial arts or meditation are practiced.


28. Positive psychology studies positive emotions and character traits that foster well-being, resilience and creativity in individuals and communities. Among the most important researchers there are Martin Seligman, Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, Philip Zimbardo.


30. Tony Robbins, well-known trainer and writer in the field of personal development and motivation.

31. In Buddhism, the “Middle Way”, in sanskrit called Madhyamika, defines the Buddhist schools following a philosophical vision equally distant from the two extremes of nihilism (which denies the existence of reality) and eternalism (which believes in the existence of an absolute reality).
32. Donald Winnicott (1896-1971), British psychoanalyst and great researcher in the field of developmental and child psychology.


35. Yoda, the Jedi Master, is the well-known character of the Star Wars saga.

36. Peter Levine, American psychologist and writer, is the director of the Somatic Experiencing Trauma Institute in Boulder, CO.

37. Jeffrey Zeig, American psychotherapist and writer, is the founder and director of the Milton H. Erickson Foundation.