

Conversations with Orland Bishop

Part 3: The Ecology of Consciousness

Study notes

Unit 1: Reverence and Irreverence

To begin this session, Orland further explains a principle that he often raises, the practice of asking, “Who do I need to be for you to be who you’re meant to become?” It is a question that applies to relationships to other humans as well as to one’s relationship to the world. It can include action, participation, aligning, or simply making space.

To host another’s becoming is also to change oneself; that is why Orland says, “Every human being is a threshold for me to cross into a higher expression of myself.”

To accomplish this, Orland shares his fundamental practice, a practice from which he says all else springs: attentiveness. As he describes it, this includes all aspects of the human being: the body and its feelings, the mind and its thoughts, the heart and the spirit. To be a powerful agent of the becoming of others and the world, one cannot ignore any aspect of one’s humanness. Therefore, he does not support teachings like “You are not your body.” Sometimes you must BE your body; it is appropriate to direct your attention there. Other times the body must be sacrificed for a higher purpose, requiring the direction of attentiveness elsewhere. This clarity comes from knowing one’s purpose.

This knowledge of purpose is not primarily an intellectual intelligence, as Orland makes clear in the second segment. It comes through moral intelligence. It is a function of the heart. Perception of the given world awakens in the human being a kind of creativity, to give meaning to the world and to pursue truth. Orland’s speech in the middle of this segment is particularly deep; I do not yet fully understand it after multiple listenings, yet as usual I feel like I received something new from it each time – especially when I make the effort to give meaning and find truth in this “given.”

In the third segment we explore a few different flavors of irreverence. First is to defuse what might be called “false reverence,” the kind that makes the sacred so serious we don’t touch it. Irreverence in this sense is akin to holding an open mind and an open heart, like a child. That is why Orland says the Fool is the greatest card in the Tarot deck. It liberates us from our inheritances.

Another aspect of irreverence Orland illuminates is that of caution, a shying away from that which we are unready. Because, he says, what we reach for in the world also reaches for us – whether or not we are ready. And so sometimes we properly shy away from too close an encounter with the sacred.

Then we talk about a very serious topic – not taking oneself too seriously! This part is self-explanatory. All idols, all graven images, all self-identities must ultimately fall, as they can only be accurate representations of the real for a single instant (if then). Irreverence casts down the idols, the vanity, the self-importance, the worship of one's own image or another person's image. When we laugh at ourselves, we are together in truth. Clearing away the false, the true become clearer – that we are divine beings.

For meditation/contemplation

There is so much in this session, but I'll just offer you one sentence Orland said: "There is a reverse part of our will that when I'm reaching for something, it's also reaching for me." Meditate on this and see its truth. We are in a responsive universe. Inside and outside are not separate. We are not the only ones striving to become.

Unit 2: Dissolving the Self

In this session I begin by asking, from various angles, "What happens to us after we die?" Orland is a bit evasive because, as he eventually reveals, knowledge of this kind is kept secret for a very good reason. He is again vague about exactly what this reason is, but I know part of it is that the full experience of most of the life-paths required in our current age hinges on the perception of mortality. A wall of separation is required between the earth realm and other realms.

Given that, Orland is careful to offer knowledge whose application is independent of what happens after we die. I'll pull a couple things for special attention. First is the idea that the soul, upon leaving the body, enters the earth and delivers to it all the learning from that lifetime, all that it experienced. Interacting with the being of the earth, the soul of the departed can also transmit the earth's wisdom to those who knew her.

What persists after death? Is there still a subject, a self? Orland says there is a witness, the same witnessing function that we exercise in life. I think Orland is also saying that because human witnessing is distinct from the witnessing of other beings, humans contribute something unique to the development of the planet merely by being here and living out our life stories.

A second important teaching here is the idea to source life forces beyond those inherited from the body; to be in a sense not limited by the body. That reduces attachment to the body and thus the fear of death. It also brings more understanding, vitality, and empathy. Therefore, Orland says, "It is critical to experience thinking free of the brain, feelings free of the emotions, and perceptions free of the body."

To access these, we go to the second segment of this unit, in which Orland talks about sacrifice, love, and meditation. The ideal for the human, he says, is "I'm willing to be less of me that you may become more of you." Less of me means the stripping away or the sacrifice of that which is not really me anyway, of that which is not permanent, that which must die.

To what do we give our bodies, our selves? That is a choice. We give them to what we hold sacred. Orland advocates making each other sacred; thus our bodies, our life forces, become a sacrament. And, he explains, this does not deplete us: "The more I give love, the more love is created; the more I give

devotion, the more devotion is created. The higher forces of the human being, the more we give it away, the more it comes into being.” This seems contrary to the logic of materiality, but it is the law of higher realms.

Orland suggests a practice of meditation around dissolving the self, which is a practice not only for life but also for what comes thereafter. After all, he says, at some point we all must give away our thoughts, our feelings, and our bodies. That doesn’t mean we should stop using these faculties, but we need not imagine that we can hold onto them forever.

For meditation/contemplation

This session has a lot of subtle metaphysical information, yet the practice Orland offers is quite straightforward. “I dissolve myself.” Give it a try – you don’t even have to understand it for it to work. Just sit and do it. You will know what it means as you do it. The things that you hold together as an identity will come up for examination, and you can let them go. Don’t worry – they’ll come back as needed. You won’t die. Well, in a sense you will. You will become less and through that you will become more. Try this practice, if you dare.

Unit 3: Becoming Together

The conversation in this session, which happened right before covid, is all the more relevant today at a time when our society lacks civility and when generally held agreements are unraveling.

It is obvious today that society has fractured into conflicting reality bubbles that can barely communicate with one another. Where can we find healing? What can bring us together again? How can we arrive again at what I call a unifying story of the people? Orland here identifies an important prerequisite to such a story: simply, the willingness to enter one. Then we can ask the question Orland poses, the social version of the personal question of how can I be so that you can be you. It is, “What agreements can we share that we can be here with these changing times?”

Next Orland speaks of social asset mapping, which, without going into the details, is a process of coming together in mutual agreement on the validity of everyone’s needs and in the capacity of the society to meet them. It is a kind of prerequisite or launchpad for imaging a future together. A striking symptom of the illness of Western civilization is its failure of imagination. In the 1950s there was broad, implicit consensus about the future, and confidence that we could achieve anything we want to. That consensus is still to be found today in China, but not in my country. There is no shared vision of an inspiring future. As Orland would put it, without the shared willingness of humanity, we cannot act as a host for nature to play with us and deliver new gifts. He calls it “vibrancy” – “feeling connected to the life realm we are inhabiting.”

Think about that. Are we as a society connected to the life realm we are inhabiting?

In the second segment Orland eventually arrives at a very simple prescription for building the field of collective willingness: kindness. To the cynical political activist, kindness might seem like a dodging of the systemic issues – telling people to just be nice to each other rather than to examine the conditions of oppression. However, here he describes kindness as the expression of a basic orientation that holds

each other in reverence. Thus it resonates with and strengthens the source from which meaningful social change must come. The source is the collective carrying of each other's will. That commitment also is expressed as kindness – which is not always the same as “niceness,” but is to hold another in reverence, as a full human being whose needs and development are important.

For meditation/contemplation

Kindness does not mean never to disagree with someone, or never to take a stand for something you believe in, or to set a boundary. It does mean, however, to keep always in sight the truth that this person is a comrade, a divine soul. Think about the origin of the word kindness. It is to be alike, of a kind. It is to be kindred. It is to be family. If you lose sight of that, you are no longer in reality.

Therefore, let us take as a subject of contemplation an interaction in which you were not kind. Maybe you were polite. Maybe you were nice. But in that interaction, you were not in sight of the truth of that person's divinity. Maybe you were in judgment, or you wrote someone off, or you were manipulative. The purpose is not to castigate yourself, but to recognize, to bring something to awareness. In your meditation, hold that person in kindness. Touch the place in you that knows their needs are important. Find your willingness to hold their will, and for your will to be held – the will for our becoming together.