

OUR TURN

MEN AND WOMEN, WORK AND PLAY

Combining the Way of the East and the Way of the West

Everyone has a special barometer to gauge shifts and swings in the social trends which comprise the so-called American consciousness. Our personal barometer is our shared marriage and family private practice. Our clients' hurts and joys often reflect how changing social expectations and cultural conditioning mesh with personal goals and ambitions. Thus, as psychotherapists, we have a unique vantage point from which to be sensitive to the first indications of societal shifts before they become full-fledged social movements.

A result of our professional collaboration is that we rarely leave our work behind. Typically, during a hectic dinner hour, and later, when our own two children are in bed, we discuss cases of particular interest.

One night, several weeks ago, we talked over two seemingly disparate cases. One concerned a family with whom we had been involved for several years. At the start of our contact, the family had expressed anguish that their gifted son, a pre-law major in a prestigious Eastern university, had turned to a form of yogic meditation, dropped out of college, and subsisted on "brown rice and chanting." The parents wondered how they had failed their son, and why someone who showed such promise would withdraw from society for the sake of some esoteric Eastern religion. Now, four years later, we received a call from the son. "I left to seek inner peace, something more than ambition, achievement, career, a future-oriented, productive life," he told us. "But now I would like to participate in society and share something of what I've learned. I know that I don't want to spend the rest of my life in a monastery."

The second case involved a couple in their late thirties. The woman complained,

"When I was a housewife, my whole identity revolved around my kids' music and dancing lesson, and how much money my husband made. Now, as an administrative assistant in a small finance office, my identity seems to revolve around what my boss wants and how our programs are evaluated. I have a sense of competency and accomplishment, and I like that. But I feel I'm going at a bone-crushing pace, and am afraid I'm losing touch with some of the quieter pleasures I had before." Her husband noted that he liked the initiative his wife had taken in finding a job, but that he also felt threatened by it. "It seems as though she is constantly proving to me how assertive she is. I want to yell at her to prove that I'm in control, too. Or I find myself withdrawing, feeling passive and impotent."

#### WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND EASTERN SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Several more conversations, interspersed between diaper changing, spilled orange juice, and other clients, brought us to the interrelationship, as we see it, between the above two cases. Social movements, such as women's liberation or the interest in Eastern religions, are in part an expression of unfulfilled needs. In the late sixties and early seventies, the women's movement, in its most popularized and therefore most accessible (although not always most accurate) form, tended to convey the impression that a liberated woman was assertive, ambitious, independent, achievement-oriented, employed -- and also happy. Women clients voiced resentment about their trapped lives, complained of feeling worthless and dependent, and found help in assertive training, job retraining programs, consciousness-raising groups. There was a widespread need to gain social status and recognition of equal competency with men.

During this same period, many young people turned to Eastern religions and the human potential growth movement as a way of escaping the very real problems they foresaw in pursuing the careers, competition, and goal orientation

of their parents. These young people realized that what had been considered assets from a material and technological viewpoint in our male-dominated society (the so-called "typically masculine" characteristics of aggression, competition, rationality etc.) had been accompanied by a steep psychological and emotional price: a loss of living in the moment, a loss of experiencing, a loss of being. They didn't want to become like the harried executives we also see in our offices -- men who complain of the emptiness of achievement, yet who are controlled by their ambition; men who need elaborate biofeedback equipment to interpret their own bodies' signals of tension; men who need to be taught to express basic human emotions of affection or sadness.

During this period of the sixties and seventies, an interesting social phenomenon was occurring. On the one hand, women were anxious to move into the labor force for the sake of some "larger fulfillment," to establish their status and competency. On the other hand, many young people, who looked at their potential future if they moved into the labor force and absorbed the masculine-dominated values of the older generation, were moving out of the labor force, again for the sake of some "larger fulfillment," this time a spiritual peace.

#### THE SEARCH FOR FULFILLMENT: TOWARD A NEW DIALECTIC

In pursuit of these various forms of "fulfillment," something very real was gained: For women, a sense of self-assertion and self-worth; for the seekers, a sense of inner harmony and spiritual satisfaction. Yet something may also have been lost. Our women clients are now assertive, independent, employed -- but they may be depriving themselves of the more delicate, harmonious joys of life. They come to psychotherapy seeking methods of relaxation and stress and tension management; they complain that although they now feel themselves productive members of the work force, their lives seem harried and scattered. Our anecdotal observations are borne out by statistics indicating a dramatic

rise in the incidence among women of traditionally male-linked occupational diseases -- heart attacks, stomach ulcers.

Many drop-outs of the sixties and seventies also appear in our office. Frequently they are concerned that the process of "finding themselves," which has consumed a large portion of their lives, has proven necessary but insufficient. They are now looking for ways to express their sense of inner peace and tranquillity through increased social commitment.

It seems to us that American society is now in a position for a new dialectic to emerge. This new dialectic may allow for increased personal freedom and options for all of us. It suggests that one choice (e.g., a spiritual search, acting assertively) does not need to be at the expense of another (e.g., social commitment, ability to yield). We need an integrative model which reflects an amalgam suited to the temperament of America, by giving us access both to societal accomplishment and to spiritual peace.

Some possible outgrowths of this model, which could profitably be considered by both men and women, might include the following:

ASSERTIVE YIELDING: possessing the skills to stand up for your own rights, to know how to literally "be your own best friend" in any situation; and, at the same time, to have the "immoveable wisdom," the larger perspective to perceive the triviality of most situations, and the ultimate insignificance of their outcome; the ability to balance one's own self-interest with awareness and sensitivity to the needs and rights of others.

CENTERED PRODUCTIVITY: developing a sense of centeredness, of calm and oneness with oneself, independent of external events; learning the "relaxation response" without falling into passivity and powerlessness; and, at the same time, being committed to acting in the ways of the world; the ability to be rigorous, instrumental, and productive, as well as to remain non-striving and receptive.

EGOLESS ACHIEVEMENT: the ability to be tranquil and nonattached while performing optimally; learning to set goals, accomplish tasks and, at the same time, being able to separate our sense of who we are from what we accomplish. As the ancient Indian text, the Bhagavad Gita, notes, the person of wisdom is one who does actions, but has no attachment to the fruits of action.

The above concepts may at first seem like a Zen koan -- they appear contradictory and illogical. However, we feel that individuals who learn the skills of both the way of the East and the way of the West can experience the best of both worlds. They may allow themselves to be assertive, but not pushy and aggressive; they may learn to act in the ways of the world, but without suffering the unfortunate consequences of ulcers and heart disease; they may learn to love and be tender, hard-working and productive. By combining the best of two worlds we, as men and women, alone and together, may learn to work hard, have fun, and not know the difference.

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