

Both Sides Now: Illusion versus Reality

Clay Nelson © 27 March 2016

One of the few difficulties I've had as a refugee from the Northern Hemisphere is celebrating Easter with autumn's chrysanthemums and not spring's lilies. It was ingrained into me that Easter had to be a spring holiday. After all, Easter takes its name from the Saxon Mother Goddess, Eostre, which means spring. But recently I read about the northern autumn festival celebrated by Hindus, Divali. It changed my perspective. As with Easter, Divali's date is determined by the moon. It is a great festival of light—burning candles set floating out on the water along the banks of rivers and candles in people's homes and in temples, dazzling fireworks, gaily coloured greeting cards, family visits, the giving of gifts. On Divali Eve, Laksmi, the goddess of wealth and fortune is said to ride across the land astride a giant owl just at dusk, scattering her gifts to all who deserve them. To us Divali seems to be a strange admixture of Christmas (lights and gifts), Guy Fawkes (fireworks), and Halloween (flying witches and owls). To the Hindu it is a celebration of the victory of good over evil, light over darkness, of humanity's never ceasing effort to achieve a true and harmonious relationship to ultimate reality.

Sounds a lot like celebrating Easter in autumn to me. It reminds me that in Jungian terms, each season, like us, has its shadow side. Spring has autumn and summer has winter. Where one exists, it casts its shadow in the other hemisphere. They are not opposites, but one. It is only in our experience of them that they are different. They are a matter of perspective as to which is the real season. Joni Mitchell, put it this way in her song *Both Sides Now*:

*I've looked at life from both sides now,
From win and lose,
and still somehow,
It's life's illusions I recall,
I really don't know life at all.*

In the song she speaks of clouds. From one side they are fairy castles in the air and cotton candy as seen from a plane, from the other they block the sun and rain and snow on everyone.

The photo of the cat on the stairs in your order of service makes the point as well. While the picture never changes, whether or not the cat is going upstairs or downstairs depends on whether you put yourself at the bottom of the stairs looking up or at the top looking down.



Since reality tells us the cat can't be doing both, which perspective is reality? Which is an illusion?

We just had our own kiwi experience of this. In the just concluded flag referendum, each choice had its supporters, but some saw our current flag as an anachronism hanging on to our colonial past. Some saw the proposed flag as a beach towel. Our reality determined our vote.

And our perspective on politics, national identity, or aesthetics most likely determined our reality.

Sometimes what we believe reality is is determined our genetics. Not long ago a debate raged on Facebook that got covered in traditional media about what colour a certain dress was. To some it was gold and white. To others it was blue and black. To still others it could be either depending on the light it was under. It turns out what dress we see is determined by how we adjust to night vision, which is determined by our genetic code.

This whole perspective thing as to what is reality and what is illusion is a problem for Unitarians. We take pride in our rationalism. Reality is reasonable. It doesn't contradict our senses. Our five senses define what is real or not. They are our essential tools in living out our 4th principle: our commitment to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. For instance, our senses tell us dead folk don't walk out of tombs, and that live ones don't walk on water, nor are any of them born of a virgin. Reason tells the rationalist that Jesus was real, but just a man. That he was god who defied physical laws is an illusion to us, making Easter meaningless for many of us. We abhor illusion. Yet...

One of the great emphases in Hindu religious and philosophical thought is that of reality versus appearance. Outer material things and the physical world are to the Hindu philosophical mind "maya", mere appearance, and illusion. The true reality is the inner spiritual principle, Atman-Brahman, which gives life and being to all things. There is only one God, God is spirit, and God is all there is.

We may not accept the mystical pantheism of Hindu metaphysics, but the question of reality versus illusion is a pertinent one for us and for all people. How do we live for what is real and authentic, worthwhile and enduring? How can we be liberated from basing our lives on illusions that deceive or distort, dehumanise and destroy others and ourselves?

Could it be that reality is not an illusion but that our version of reality is an illusion? In other words, none of us perceive reality for what it is but rather for what we wish it to be. Unfortunately, one simply cannot see things as they really are, cannot be aware of reality. Illusions always act as mediators.

There is a difference between what something is and what we think it is. Actually what we think is utterly inconsequential to what is. Illusions do not exist in the world (out there) but within us. The inner world is fertile ground for illusions to take root, which then get projected onto the world, thus influencing the perception of others about reality.

So how can we know if illusions are creating a distortion of reality? Well, we can't while we are under their spell. We can know only after the illusions no longer exist that we were living in illusion in the first place. When we begin to understand the difference between reality and that which we impose upon it through our thoughts, choices and beliefs, we will realise that much of our despair, anger or pain was fuelled by our misperceptions.

Most conflict, whether on a personal or collective level, stems from illusions. In our daily lives there is infinite opportunity to create illusions. We create them about our jobs, finances, relationships, friendships, love and life in general to shield us from that which we view as undesired truths. We do not want to live in reality but are comfortable living in illusion. We believe that somehow the gain far outweighs the effort needed to eliminate them. Or as TS Eliot said, "Humankind cannot bear very much reality."

As human beings we are conditioned to hold onto culture, religion, tradition and politics even at the expense of our wellbeing. From these elements our identity is shaped, and how this identity expresses itself is unique to each of us. Only time will tell if this identity is congruent

with the essential self. In other words, illusions are learned and then passed on. Without knowing it, we live and express these distorted ideas, practices and patterns that influence our perceptions of reality and in turn create our reality. And then we point and say, “Look, that’s reality.” But upon further exploration, we realise that our perception was the illusion all along and not reality itself. In Joni’s words, “It’s life’s illusions I recall. I really don’t know life at all.”

In one sense all human pictures of the world are “illusion”, that is, selective oversimplifications of a sometimes bewildering and complex reality. Human beings cannot grasp the full complexity of things – physical, psychological, social or political – without some selectivity, which brings the meaning of life into something we can comprehend. The question is whether our selections help us relate to life in a more creative and truthful manner or cover up reality for purposes of self-deception and perhaps the exploitation of others. And so if we are to grow we must be willing to test and compare our own views with those of others, realising that as we change our world-view we change the world viewed and ultimately our way of living and acting within it.

Let’s take an example from the world of physics and the changing view of reality emerging out of the study of quantum mechanics. There is something called the Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle. This grows out of the fact that “atoms are not things” but instead are better understood as energy-wave-particles in a shifting field of patterns of vibrations. It is impossible for a physicist to locate the position or predict the movement of electrons and subatomic particles since they can theoretically be in two places at the same time. This negates our usual understanding of the space-time continuum. And moreover, the observer presumably affects what he or she observes. Our consciousness thus changes reality. As the observer we affect change in what we study simply by being there, and that complicates things.

Another example is Arthur Eddington’s parable of the two writing desks. First, there is the common sense solid desk of our physical senses, which we can rap with our knuckles, write on, even sit upon. This desk contrasts with the second desk of quantum physics, which consists almost entirely of empty space sprinkled with unimaginable tiny specks of energy separated by distances a hundred thousand times their own size. The interior of the atom is nearly entirely empty, a vast void.

Matter dissolves into energy vibrations; into shifting configurations. Sir James Jeans observed that at this level, “The universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine.” Arthur Eddington put it more simply, “The stuff of the world is mind stuff.”

And so we find on both the cosmic and subatomic scale the hard tangible appearance of things as seeming illusion. Perhaps Hindu metaphysics is right; the world perceived by the senses is maya, illusion. Perhaps Mary Baker Eddy is right, “matter is unreal and temporal, spirit real and eternal.”

In my last sermon, on mysticism, I explained that a mystic sees a world in which things and objects, people and human consciousness blend into one reality – it is the world of the One in which all things and events are part and parcel of one another.

When human consciousness functions everyday in a reality determined by our senses such things seem incomprehensible, unnatural, not possible. Our senses cannot reduce the world to a single identity. Ours is the world of the Many. In Hinduism this is the fundamental paradox of God and the World, the One and the Many. Like Joni Mitchell we have looked at both sides now and remains utterly confused. We really don’t know life at all. At the end of all our knowledge, life is still ultimate mystery.

And so what is reality and illusion? Well, as we're learning it all depends on where you're coming from. Sometimes we fail to see the obvious right before our eyes because we're looking for something that isn't there or doesn't exist. We seek illusions and reality passes us by. Take this story about a smuggler who brought garbage from Spain to Gibraltar every night.

Every night he would trundle up to the border with a wheelbarrow full of garbage and trash. The border guards had a pretty good idea that he was smuggling something and they would always go through that mountain of garbage and trash and couldn't find anything, and they would have to let him through. This went on for years. Finally the old man came up after years of this and said, "Well, this is my last trip, boys. I'm not going to be seeing you anymore. I'm retiring." And the border guards said, "You're retiring? We're going to miss going through all this trash and garbage all the time. We know pretty well that you're smuggling something, but we've never been able to figure out just what it is. Why don't you tell us? There's no real point in prosecuting you any more. We're very curious. If you'll just tell us what it is you've been smuggling, we won't press charges." And the guy said, "Well, all right, if you'll really promise, I'll tell you. I've been smuggling wheelbarrows."

Sometimes we do miss the obvious, fail to see the forest for the trees. So, keep your eyes open. Look for the reality behind the appearance, but in so doing; do not neglect what is in front of you.

We live in a universe in which human feelings, thoughts and aspirations are part and parcel of the life process, and we change and are changed by these inner realities and how we act upon them. It is illusion to think that only the outer reality, the appearance of things and events, is real. It is also illusion. I would contend, to believe the opposite, that only the inner reality of thought and imagination is real and the outer physical world mere illusion. One is the shadow of the other in a complementary play of wave and particle, spirit and matter, energy and mass, thought and being, Atman-Brahman, universe and God.

The challenge we all face is how to live for what is real, worthwhile and enduring in life, how to be liberated from basing our lives on illusions which deceive and harm others and ourselves. Hinduism teaches us to go beyond the mere appearance of things to the depth of reality that underlies everything that is. And so does the Easter story.

Happy Easter.