



The ill-fitting self

by Paul Biegler

Twenty-one years ago I came to a high town on the banks of the Ganges called Rishikesh. The thin air had a chill that came off the river and over the rocks that old tides had spilled on its banks. My guest house was near the part of town where they fixed cars. As we drove past I could make out the auto wallahs moving about in the grime and gloom of the workshops. Sump oil made dark rivers in the ditches and scabrous pigs nosed through it all for something to eat.

The rooms of the guest house had bare concrete floors and single beds and were grouped around a garden with few shrubs and a sparse lawn. I met Robert soon after I got there. Robert was not like other travellers I saw in India. He didn't wear yoga pants or loose cotton shirts or have a nose ring. He was more like an accountant on holidays. Faded no-name jeans worn high with a belt, beige T-shirt, close-cropped dark beard and thin-rimmed glasses.

Robert had read Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* and then moved to an ashram in upstate New York. Now he took photos of the rocks strewn by the river with a cheap plastic camera. A man in town would blow up the pictures nice and big. Back in his room, the smooth floor cool against the day's rising heat, Robert would sit before a picture in his morning meditation.

One day Robert asked me to join him. He pulled out a small pipe and we smoked it, then sat cross-legged in front of a photo. I let my eyelids droop and straightened my back and clasped my hands loosely in my lap. I could just see the brown lines that coursed over the rock. I noticed my breath, observed my thoughts and let an unseen string pull my head to the sky.

Like others I was on a quest for something elusive. So hard to find that many said it could not be named, only felt, and then in a state few could attain. The scholar Juan Mascaro said enlightenment was a climb to the Himalayas of the soul. Swami Muktananda, the founder of Siddha Yoga, thought the true goal was below ground and if one could still the mental chatter it would be revealed like a bright penny at the bottom of a pool. One would know the Self.

In middle age I look back a little wryly at the younger me. My path has been lit by seminar room neon, not the North Indian sun, and my take on the self is firmly rooted in the mundane. Now I deify the evolutionary theorists who say that "to be self aware is to be other aware".

People with insight into their own psychology can work out what others will feel, think and do and use that to their advantage. Thomas Hobbes knew this when he wrote in *Leviathan* "whosoever looketh into himself... he shall thereby



read and know what are the thoughts and passions of all other men upon the like occasions”.

Mirror neurones help. Brain cells for sensing the world are very close to those for acting in the world, which makes it easy to copy people and understand why they do as they do. When a baby sees its mother smile it smiles back and, through that, knows happiness. Knowing what others are feeling is key to negotiating help and protection from the social group.

The self is also a time traveller. Folks can slingshot an ‘I’ into the future, kitted out with their likes, talents, fears and flaws, to try out jobs, study, a romance or a holiday. ‘I’ can rehearse how things turn out and report back. A warm glow is the currency of success just as it is when things work out well in the present. And when things go badly the mistake is only in the mind’s eye and not the costlier domain of reality.

Failure on the road to self knowledge bodes ill. Nietzsche’s entreaty was “become who you are”, and for those that remain who they are not, there is a price. For Herman Hesse Western schooling was a straitjacket that stifled self-realisation. In *The Prodigy* Hans Giebenrath was coerced by the times into an elite classical education. But, happiest fishing for carp, rudd, or gudge-

on in the local stream, the boy found only self-alienation in the academy and drowned himself.

If humans evolved to be self-aware, it is puzzling that the quest for self is so fraught. The answer may lie in our need for explanation. Psychologist Nicholas Humphrey says introspection leads to an expectation that actions can be explained; we put on a jumper because we are cold and open the fridge when we are hungry. Whenever we see a human ‘effect’ we expect to find its cause, as Humphrey demonstrates in a thought experiment:

Notice that a fire in your own private hearth causes smoke to issue from your chimney, and try not to imagine that the smoke coming from the house across the road implies the presence of a fire within.

Not only is it hard to imagine smoke without fire, it is uncomfortable too. This is cognitive dissonance, or the unpleasant feeling that happens when thoughts don’t fit.

It is not too great a leap, I think, to say that many on the spiritual trail seek an explanation for their existence, a rationale for simply being. Yet when it is not forthcoming they are left with the jarring dissonance of the ‘explanatory vacuum’. And so a lot of people never get past base camp on the climb to the summit of the soul. The explanatory

gap may also be why many adopt beliefs with tenuous foundations.

In 1931 the experimental psychologist Norman Maier asked people to tie together the ends of two strings suspended from the ceiling. The difficulty was that when holding onto one string the other was out of reach. When people couldn’t do it Maier would brush past one of the strings and set it in motion. After this cue many succeeded by tying a weight to the string, swinging it like a pendulum, and then catching it while holding the first string.

Even though Maier had ‘primed’ people to find the solution, two-thirds had no idea they were helped by his cue. Instead they came up with a range of explanations including “a course in physics suggested it to me”, and, from a professor of psychology, “I had imagery of monkeys swinging from trees”. It is now well established that people at a loss to explain primed behaviour tend to ‘confabulate’ or make up reasons for it.

Maybe the quest for self exposes a life without reason and so we imagine deities and a divine purpose to salve the psychic pain. And these post hoc rationalisations may also be adaptive. On a strictly Darwinian view, beliefs evolved because they enhance survival, not necessarily because they are true.



If beliefs about a supreme creator or mystical meaning breed persistence, they may benefit those who, driven by them, push on against the odds.

These theories make good sense to me on the page but, somehow, when I try to stitch them on to Robert they seem a poor fit. I've begun to wonder more about who he was and what he might have become, so I've been searching for him on the Internet. I've found a cellist, an attorney, a US marine and a TV producer. There was also

a systems analyst, an estate agent and an aerospace engineer. But the photos didn't fit and the blurbs weren't quite right anyway.

Robert had an air of knowing about him. When he inhaled the pungent smoke it was with purpose, not abandon. And when he sat calmly before his river stone there was resolve and conviction, not aimlessness or desperation.

Maybe he's still meditating in that ashram. Maybe he has let go of his ego and embraced emptiness to become

one with Brahma. Or perhaps he's in Dharamsala as the unearthly tones of the Tibetan horns echo *Aum* across the valley. Perhaps he's left this world and, as dependent arising predicts, is preparing for rebirth in one of the six realms of existence.

I don't know. But if he could read me reducing our practice to its banal psychological roots I think he would just shake his head with humour, acceptance and wisdom, and return quietly to his contemplation. ▣

