

Roy Ridgway

Rhythm and Reciprocal Maintenance

In everything there is a natural rhythm. You move between the peaks and valleys, joy and sorrow, excitement and boredom, birth and death. The rhythm of life - activity and repose, - is present in every part of the body. Every cell has its life cycle. The heart itself is reborn and dies with every beat: the sympathetic nerves speed up its action, the parasympathetics slow it down. In every living thing that moves there is, an accelerator and brake. With the human body trouble comes when you accelerate or brake too suddenly, or when you keep your foot hard down on the accelerator.

At times of great stress adrenalin reinforces sympathetic, fight-or-flight activity throughout the body. There is a pounding of the heart, a fluttering of the stomach - butterflies - and if this goes on too long - keeping the foot on the accelerator - the heart is injured or there is excessive hydrochloric acid in the stomach, causing ulcers.

In peak experiences there is climbing, reaching the peak and descending. You enjoy the climb and then there is the pleasure of reaching the top, and end achieved, which doesn't last long. You can't stay forever in the rarefield atmosphere of the peak.

This movement of life, going from a safe position to an insecure one, where there is risk-taking, tension, a striving and straining towards goals, followed by achievement or failure, and then a return to a position of safety, can be compared to being at home, leaving home, and then returning. You grow up, you experience all the struggles, failures and achievements, joys and sorrows of youth and middle age, and then you gradually withdraw from the conflicts - or, the rat race - into old age.

The end is something like the beginning. In old age you spend most of your days, as you did in childhood, at home, becoming innocent again like a child (Maslow calls this innocence 'a more sophisticated second innocence') which is probably why old people usually get on so well with small children.

William Blake wrote about this rhythm of life -

*Man was made for joy and woe;
And if this we rightly know,
Safely through the world we go.*

If you are impatient or hurry too much, you risk getting nowhere at all. Obsession with achievement, moving frantically from goal to goal, may result in a paralysis of the will; and then there will be feelings of frustration, tension and anger, which act like antibodies, the rejection mechanism, restoring the rhythm of the mind. Or you may withdraw into yourself and stop doing anything at all.

Hurrying has been described as a feeling of 'not-enoughness' which leads to 'too-muchness'. The feeling of 'not-enoughness' is like the condition known as

'festination' in Parkinson's disease (or *paralysis agitans*) where there is a forced hurrying of bodily movements, speech or thought leading to 'freezing' or 'blocking,' the inability to say or do anything. A lot of sickness, including neurosis, is like this: it calls a halt to forced or unnatural activity. And that, I believe, is why good music is so therapeutic: it restores a sense of rhythm, Doctors should prescribe Beethoven and Mozart, or Cat Stevens, more often.

It is interesting that music was used by French dentists of the 18th century to help lessen the nervous shock resulting from the crude dentistry of the period. Pythagoras of Samos was the first to conceive of the universe as a vast musical instrument. He was also the first to claim that he could hear the music of the spheres. His theory was that all things, animate and inanimate, were constructed upon harmonic patterns, and that it was possible to translate these patterns into basic chords.

The Chinese discovered what they call the *great tone*, or Kung, which is said to be like the middle Fa on the keyboard of the piano. To them, it was the tone resulting from the sounds and voices of nature - the roaring of the sea, for instance, or the sound of the wind through the forest.

Many of us cannot accept the natural rhythm that our time of life demands of us. The young want to be old; the old want to be young.

Attitudes are related to biological processes; for every change in the body there is a change in the mind. A young person, whose nervous system quickly restores the body to health after stress situations, can afford to take risks, to live energetically, with accompanying attitudes of mind: quick-wittedness, 'putting his foot on it', a desire for novelty, adventure and so on; and sometimes there is a surplus of energy that is discharged in violence or aggression. An old person, on the other hand, needs to conserve his energy, because nerves, muscles and body tissues are not easily repaired; and so he tends to be cautious, slow-moving, thoughtful and retiring; his activity tends to centre on his mind rather than his body.

As I myself grow old I have the feeling of returning home - a sense of peace - the busy world is hushed - a sense of fulfilment, of repose. This is not the result of effort, a slowing down that is accompanied by various insights about life. You are able to see the whole of life, not just a part of it. You don't live in the part any more.

This slowing down leads to what Maslow describes as a trust in the self and a trust in the world, the giving up of straining and striving and permitting oneself to be determined by the intrinsic matter-in-hand, the here-now.

The way I look back to childhood, for instance, changes as I change. In adolescence, I saw my childhood as something I had to put behind me; I rejected my parents and their ideas and tried to make a life of my own, which is normal and healthy for a boy in his teens. Now, as befits my age, as I go back in memory, I am quite happy to return home. I go back to the scenes of childhood not as a prodigal son, but with my eyes open and without rose-coloured spectacles. I return home to share the problems of my

parents, because I can now see their problems as my own, just as I can see my achievements as theirs. I am no longer ashamed of them. I have grown up at last.

In the memory you go back to the same place. Everything seems the same; but you have changed, and so you see something quite different.

This can happen, in fact, where you are now. You change, and then your surroundings change. You slow down and the world slows down. People you know, your family and friends, change; they respond to the change they see in you.

There is a poem by Thom Gunn called *The Nature of an Action*. The first verse describes a room with 'heavy-footed chairs, a glass bell loaded with grapes and pears, a polished table . . .' Gunn describes it as 'a cluttered square of fact'. He leaves the room, steps into the corridor, 'directed by the compass of my heart . . .'

But . . .

*Although the narrow corridor appears
So short, the journey took me twenty years,*

As he travelled along the corridor he found all his habits were obstacles. He tried to find answers in the mind. 'I groped to find a handle in my mind', but although he could see the corridor clearly enough he 'doubted it was there': you can't see anything with the mind alone. Finally, he decided his 'cause lay in the will that opens straight upon an act'. He found the handle of another room 'a simple handle found' and walked straight in. And there he found the same room, described in the first verse . . . 'a glass bell loaded with grapes and pears, a polished table . . .' All that effort - and for what? The answer is in the last verse -

*Much like the first, this room in which I went.
Only my being there is different.*

Life is understood in action, in movement, moving 'straight upon an act', willing yourself through your actions to be what you are, thinking in action. This, although you may be in the same place, doing more or less what you have always done, the difference is you have chosen to be *there* - you have opened the door and you are fully awake.

I go back to the beginning (childhood) and see the beginning as it was. Not as the end, as Jean-Paul Sartre and the Gestaltists see reminiscence (beginning at the end; seeing what you are now in the child), you remember, but as it was, with all its problems, emotional, cultural, psychological, economic. There are not unfinished business, because as a child they weren't my business. I didn't see the problems, some of which I can see clearly. I don't know about them, couldn't know about them, through my memory, but through studying the past objectively, in books and diaries, letters and so on.

The actions of others are concerned with their attempts at solving problems; but, of course, a child doesn't know this.

I also go back, to discover what were the internalized attitudes of parents and others that contributed to my life style, my script. And maybe I don't have to go back to do this; I can begin at the end, in the here and now. However you look at it, the past changes, objectively and subjectively. Perhaps objectively you need to know what is happening in some remote part of the Milky Way, millions of light years away, before you can understand what is happening here.

Looking back and seeing my parents as they were has nothing to do with forgiveness, justification or criticism. It is just seeing the past as it was, not making judgement; and it is understanding what remains in the memory (the debit balance) and seeing why it remains there. I want to be able to say to the memory, 'Go away! Don't befuddle me!'

Is it a screen memory? Is what I remember a kind of personal mythology that screens the truth? I can find answers by studying what the specialists and the psychologists, have to say and then by testing their necessary. I know most of the answers myself. I merely have to see 'what is'. The answers are in 'what is'.

When I forgive someone for bad behaviour is it because I need to forgive myself for my own bad behaviour, always assuming, that 'bad' means anything at all? When I make excuses for someone else am I really making excuses for myself? Conversely, when I am unforgiving, am I seeing something in myself that I cannot forgive, the projectively despised part of myself that I have repressed or refuse to see? I don't ask these questions any more, because, I know that the answer, in almost every case, is yes.

Other people's problems are my own. By helping to change others I am helping; by changing myself I change others. You are you because (not *and*) I am I, and vice versa. The whole and the parts, society and the individual, are mutually supportive - or, as John Bennett put it, they are held together by 'reciprocal maintenance'. It is not possible to become a person except in a community of persons, just as it is not possible for a heart to be a heart without all the other organs and veins and arteries and cells and so on that make up the human body; but a heart is not a lung.

