Thoughts too deep for tears: the transformation of emotion into feeling

Michael Lipson, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist, Great Barrington, Mass., USA

Summary

Adult emotional development can include the transformation of self-oriented and largely non-cognitive sentimentality into outwardly oriented and perceptive *feeling* capacities. Romantic and other writers have hinted at this possibility, including Novalis, Keats, Wordsworth and Rudolf Steiner. Examples and practical considerations offer the reader a path to understand and undertake this crucial aspect of development.

Key words: emotion; feeling; spiritual development; romanticism; Rudolf Steiner

A man came into my office with an unusual complaint. He had no emotions. No hopes, no fears. No compassion. No regrets, no jealousy. No joy. He was beloved by others, partly because he could act the part so well: he could sound interested in them, and profess love for them, and work with them, but it was all play-acting. When those closest to him died, he felt nothing.

He did have a kind of shadow emotion, however: he sensed that he was missing something. This was a dim kind of longing or regret, and his seeking therapy for it a dim kind of hope. He knew quite specifically what it was about emotion that he wanted to get if only he could: *life*. He sensed that these sorrows and empathies and hopes that other people spoke about contained a lively energy that his own inner experience lacked.

My patient's condition – known as alexothymia – brings into sharp relief what we normally gain from emotions without realizing it: a depth, an interiority, a connection to the human condition, and above all these a quality of vibrant life that normal thinking does not have by itself.

Precious as it is to experience emotions, they are also a prime part of what we dread, avoid, and suppress. The rich liveliness of emotional life, in exaggerated form, is the stuff of all psychopathology: *mad, sad, and scared* –or in their Greek and Latin cognates, *antisocial personality*

disorder, depression, and *anxiety and phobia* remain some of the most common mental health complaints. So in psychotherapy, we have a lot to do with diminishing the painful effects of various emotions that my patient would have been only too eager to experience.

Still, whether desired or undesired, the range of normal and abnormal emotionality – including even the finer emotional states like humour, wonder, awe, curiosity, compassion, love – does not exhaust the potential of affective life.

To cast our net wider, we might first listen to Novalis's searching question, from *The Disciples at Sais* (1798): 'Does the human learn to feel only once?'1 He hints at a second learning, beyond emotions, that most of us have not fully explored.

This paper aims first at the clarification of a distinction – widely enough experienced, yet rarely noticed and discussed – between two kinds of affective mental contents that I will refer to as *emotion* and *feeling*.

My further aim is to suggest that the path from a life of emotion to a life of feeling can enhance adult development. Psychotherapies and spiritual disciplines do best when they help us transform our aching emotions, our personal *sensitivity*, into feeling as a *sense organ*.

To state the distinction most basically, *emotion* is about oneself, about one's inner weather, while *feeling* is about the world.

In emotional experience, I notice that I am sad, or happy, or jealous, or humiliated, or afraid, or angry. The emotions tell me about myself: what I am going through. This is most of what gets discussed in any account of the affective life of the individual, and much ink has been spilt, from Buddha's stenographers to the Stoics and into our time, on the question of how to handle the emotions.

Feeling, by contrast, informs us about the world. That is why it is called 'feeling'. As the hand feels the clay, for instance, and can discern its texture, moisture level, temperature, and viscosity, so our ability to feel with the heart and mind tells us about the world, and not only about ourselves.

We feel what the music is saying; we feel the rightness of a mathematical proof; we feel the proximity of a spiritual being; we feel the mood of the crowd; we feel that a sequence of thought is logical. Feeling is an informative capacity, a way of perceiving. It is intelligent, but not by words or speculative reasoning. Of course it can be thought of as subjective, and feeling does always have an emotional, self-sensing component as well; but compared with anger, say, or fear, these perceptive experiences are predominantly about the world beyond the normal subject, and its emphasis is not on the inner weather of this subject. We could also say that feeling makes the outside world into an aspect of the inner world, or the inner world a player in the outer world: it is a realm of non-dual, non-separative alertness.

Freud, at the start of modern psychotherapy, taught us to acknowledge more of our emotional life. He wanted us to admit our anxieties, admit our miseries, admit our unacceptable sexual and aggressive tendencies, and embrace the full extent of what passes through our minds and hearts. His struggle against false piety, against repression and hiding and superstition, remains relevant. It also continued the long history of our collective wisdom, which has repeatedly counselled us to meet the emotions, not hide them, not pretend them away. To this day, much of contemporary Buddhism and popular psychology encourages us to dwell with our emotions, no matter how painful, and not deny them.

Actually, we're attached to emotions, even if we try to avoid or suppress them at times, even if we suffer from them. The first reason for our attachment has already been mentioned. As my alexothymic patient sensed, the emotions are more

alive than normal thinking, and even normal sense perception. When I'm angry, I feel the heat, the juiciness, the edginess. We are drawn to life.

Another reason why we love the emotions has to do with the sense of self. Since our emotions always have us focus on ourselves, and often hold us in opposition to others, they seem to give us a self to be. It's as if I know who I am because I'm happy, or sad, or frightened, or outraged. We do need to be someone, and we need it so desperately that we will settle for false substitutes or very partial identities. Emotions provide us with a compelling, if mistaken, identity.

Political movements and entertainments of all kinds foster intense emotional experience. They provide us with lively experiences and enhance our attachment to the everyday self, intensifying its rootedness in subject–object duality.

The beginning of emotional maturity may indeed be to acknowledge the full range of emotions and to notice what their special characteristics are, as well as why we might want to hide from them (e.g. when they are conventionally unacceptable) and why we might nevertheless be attached to them. Books like Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), fuelled by Vipassana Buddhism, invite the equanimity that grows when we allow emotions to come and allow them to go. They teach us to notice emotions, but not blindly obey the impulses that might come from them. This strand of psychology helps the practitioner gradually to release an initial identity with the emotions, and to identify instead with the inner observer of the emotions. We will probably always benefit from what this 'observer' response to emotions can offer us, since emotions keep coming, and we keep fruitlessly either obeying their dictates or trying to push them away.

Most current teachings of spirituality and psychology go no further than this, however. They do not point to the transformation from the lively self-orientation of emotion to the even livelier world-orientation of feeling.

The Novalis quotation above, about learning to feel a second time, initiates a longer speculation by the character who speaks it:

> Does [the human being] only learn how to feel once?
> This most heavenly, this most natural of all senses he still knows only slightly;
> Through feeling, the ancient, longed-for epoch would return;
> The element of feeling is an inner light,
> That refracts into more beautiful, more powerful colours.
> Then the constellations would arise within him,
> He would learn to feel the whole world,
> More clearly, more variously than the eye now shows him edges and planes.
> He would become master of an endless play
> And forget all foolish striving
> In an eternal, self-nourishing, and ever-growing pleasure.
> Thinking is only a dream of feeling,
> A deadened feeling,
> A pale grey, weak life.

Novalis uses feeling as a sense organ here, and imagines that it is both an advance and a kind of reminiscence – a redemption or return to an unfallen state ('the ancient, longed-for epoch'). Notice how he has the human 'feel the whole world': it is not a question of emotional self-reference. And interestingly, just as the senses of sight and hearing give us a variegated, clear world, full of specificities the individual could not invent, the new or renewed sense of feeling would give us the world 'more clearly, more variously' even than the eye gives us the multiplicity of all that can be seen outwardly. Unlike the emotions, which may be lively but vague, feeling is the mother of thinking itself, compared with which normal thinking is something pale and weak.

Novalis anticipated many other Romantic era poets. In John Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy' we have a characterization that is less august as far as the end-point, but more detailed in terms of the issue of transmutation. That is, while Novalis looks to the promised land of feeling-sensitivity, Keats gives us something like a therapeutic method by which the desert of normal emotion can be crossed.

The first stanza of Keats's famous ode involves his saying, in a lyrical way, that it is better not to take drugs to diminish the sense of 'melancholy' – a broad term at the time, which would cover many of our emotional troubles. He warned that any drug remedy would 'drown the wakeful anguish of the soul'. Keats wanted the emotional experience to remain wakeful, vibrant, and fully acknowledged, but unlike our contemporary psychology he did not stop there. In the second stanza of the poem he advocates a specific way to address the power of melancholy. 'When the melancholy fit shall fall,' he advises,

> Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
> Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave
> Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
> Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
> Imprison her soft hand and let her rave,
> And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

The advice here is to overfeed the sorrow ('glut' it) with elements of the natural and human world that you will be able to perceive all the more intimately and discerningly because of the power of the emotion, now turned into real feeling – an outward sensing. Thus the rose is noticed in its dewy morning condition. He celebrates the evanescent sand-rainbow, a rare and delicate phenomenon of the retreating waves. He feels the opulence and full roundness of the peonies, bursting with their soft whiteness. He disregards his lover's anger and goes straight to the soul perceived through her eyes. *This* is what you can do with the perceptive energy that lives within melancholy, far beyond denial or acceptance. Georg Kuehlewind (in *The Renewal of the Holy Spirit*): 'The power of sorrow is not the power of *sorrow*.'[2]

In a last example from the Romantic era, we could cite Wordsworth, in 'Tintern Abbey' (1798), where he speaks of 'the power of harmony and the deep power of joy' that transform our aesthetic, feeling appreciation of nature into what he calls,

> That blessed mood,
> In which the burthen of the mystery,
> In which the heavy and the weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world
> Is lighten'd.

This lightening of mood renders existence more intelligible, and thus gives access into what Wordsworth calls 'the life of things' – that is, the sense of the meaningful even of supposedly inanimate physicality ('What was made was life in him' – the Thomist translation of the Prologue of John 1:3/4).

For both Keats and Wordsworth, the way to an education of emotionality into its potential as life-giving enlightener of existential meaning proceeds through contemplation of nature. Rudolf Steiner puts the issue in somewhat different language, more as a moral overview, emphasizing the self-inhibition involved in this alchemy and not linking it exclusively to contemplation of nature.

Like Keats, he develops the idea using sorrow as the emotion to be transformed, though what he says applies to all emotions. The passage is to be found in his early *Guidance in Esoteric Training* (1903–1922) (Steiner, 1972), in the course of Steiner's 'Exegesis' to the Theosophical classic, *Light on the Path*, by Mabel Collins (1968:xx):

> What do we bring to the object of our understanding? Examine yourself and you will find that pleasure and pain are your answer to the impressions of the sensory and supersensible world. .... Only when all pleasure and pain are consumed in

> the blessedness of the higher self, then understanding is possible.... So the tender sensitivity of the eye should not unload itself in tears, but render golden the impressions it receives. Dissolve every tear and lend its shimmering gleam to the ray penetrating your eye. *Your* pleasure and *your* pain are wasted power – wasted for understanding. For the power that flows out into this pleasure and this pain should stream into the object of the understanding.
>
> 'Before the eye can see, it must become incapable of tears.'
>
> ...Burn up all your tears in the desire to help. Don't weep over the poor, *understand* their condition and help them! Don't grumble about evil; understand it and change it into good. Your tears only cloud the clarity of the light. You *sens*e all the more delicately, the less you are *sensitive*.[3]

Wordsworth had already pointed to 'thoughts too deep for tears' in his *Intimations* ode. Here, Steiner brings the Romantics up to our era with the reference to an inflamed 'sensitivity' – as in the hypersensitivity of the over-anxious and over-vulnerable citizens of the Western elites. It is the sensitivity of those who are easily hurt, who cannot take criticism, who imagine they alone feel how awful things are – in other words, all of us in our self-indulgent moments. Stephen Levine, the Buddhist teacher and counsellor of the terminally ill, used to say, 'On a good day, I am hard to insult'. On such a day, or at such a moment, we would not be busy noticing ourselves, but notice the world in its richness and poignancy and in its need for us to get up and help.

In Steiner's formulation, the heightened capacity to sense or feel the reality of the phenomena before us also leads to action. 'Don't grumble about evil. Understand it and change it into good.' In this, he brings the power of emotion toward its full development, not only into a much deeper or livelier perception of meaning, but into the will. We see this kind of gesture in Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Archaic Torso of Apollo', in which, after contemplating the ancient sculpture, he senses, 'You must change your life' (accessible at goo.gl/F7mkEj). Every truly spiritual perception gives us a task of some kind, an impulse, inviting us into the active weaving of the world, inside and out.

My alexothymic patient did have at least one moment of real, normal emotion, which also had its feeling side, and at the same time prompted inspired action – so he went through the whole gamut in a split second, as if the soul's progress had been worked on invisibly for years, suspended, and awaiting its opportunity for crystallization.

He was in the check-out line at a supermarket, in the first years of the Obama administration, when he noticed an African-American family with two daughters ahead of him in line. The girls pointed up to a *People Magazine* cover on a rack. The cover showed the President, the First Lady, and Sasha and Melia, their daughters. The girls in the supermarket seemed to register that there were two black girls, just like them, in the White House, the highest political perch in the country. Suddenly my patient's eyes filled with tears. A white man in his sixties, he had always had a mysterious connection with African-American culture. After seeing the girls point to that magazine cover, he intensified his efforts at jazz and blues singing, and started to appear frequently at open-mic nights in local clubs. People in the audience were astonished at the power and evocative range of his voice, and he brought many to moments of shocking realization. He himself had lapsed back into inward emotional woodenness, so that he could not feel the feelings he incited in others. But the effective love stayed on in the form of his gift.

One night, I went to see one of his performances. I sat in the back of the bar and watched the crowd. When he started to sing, the atmosphere of the

place changed. Glasses stopped clinking and conversations hushed. My patient sang blues classics and spirituals – unaccompanied, slapping his thigh for rhythm. Everyone in the audience had goose bumps or tears. Many rushed up afterward to thank him and tell him how deeply he had touched them. He motivated in them what he could no longer experience for himself.

My patient's experience is a strange and outlier case, hardly representative of the norm. But for humans, there is no norm. We each find our own way, through exercise or grace, into moments of deeper perception – sometimes too deep for tears; sometimes deep enough to stir us into action. Steiner puts it this way, toward the end of *Occult Science, an Outline* (1962/1910):[4] 'Spiritual cognition transforms itself, through that which it is, into love'.

Michael Lipson, Ph.D. is a Clinical Psychologist practising in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, USA. As Assistant Clinical Professor in the Department of Pediatrics at Columbia Medical School, Michael worked for many years with children with HIV/AIDS at Harlem Hospital. A George Soros Faculty Scholar, he developed a programme to help health professionals who work with the terminally ill face their own issues around grief and loss. He is the author of *Stairway of Surprise* and *Group Meditation*, and the translator of Rudolf Steiner's *Philosophy of Freedom*. Michael teaches internationally on themes of meditation, mortality and human development. Find his writings at: **michaellipson.org.**

Notes

[1] The Novalis quotations in this article are the author's own translation from the *Lehrlinge zu Sais*, 1802. (The latter was started in 1798, but not published until 1802.)

[2] This is the author's translation from *Die Erneuerung des Heiligen Geistes*, Verlag Freies Geistesleben, 1992, p. 77.

[3] This is the author's translation from the section, 'Exegesis to Mabel Collins' *Light on the Path'*, from Anweisungen fuer eine Esoterische Schulung, RS Verlag, 1979, p. 136.

[4] This is the author's translation from the 'Present and future of cosmic and human evolution' chapter in *Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss*, RS Verlag, 1976, p. 308.

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