

## THE MANU WITHOUT PORTFOLIO COLUMN, 2

### Wisdom-while-u-wait

**Manu Bazzano**

On a friend's recommendation, this morning I went to my first session with a transpersonal therapist. Googled him beforehand, of course, and thought we might be a good fit: he sounded older and wiser and might not find my life experiences too left-field – LSD, radical politics, India, zen training – plus the even weirder incidence of attempting to gain middle-class respectability by eventually becoming a shrink. I needed to talk a few things through. Plus, it was high time to question my own prejudices on all things transpersonal: out with the fairies, preachy, carrying nebulous dispatches from the great unknown.

As it turned out, all these prejudices were confirmed. The spiritual bloke graciously allowed me to talk for the first 15 minutes, during which I sketched my current struggles with work and friendships, including, as a backdrop, the loss of my mother at nineteen. His response was baffling: 'All actions have consequences. There is sensation, and then there is the meaning we construct on the back of it.' He banged his hand on the table to show me what a sensation is. Don't get me wrong. I tend to like generalities. I even like oracles, and I was fond of *I Ching* in my 20s. But his sibylline response had precious little to do with what I'd said. Still, I decided to give him a chance. To no avail: it was downhill from then on – or uphill on the Stairway to Cloud Cuckoo Land.

I was told that all my struggles are of my own making; that it all comes from my ego. That by the very act of speaking and 'give meaning' to an 'unadulterated' reality, I was moving away from what things are in their 'true' sense. I asked whether this may apply to him too, whether he too veered away at times from 'the things themselves' or did it only applied to deluded schmucks like me? Yes, he conceded, to some degree it applied to him too, because he

too was bound to language. Unlike me, he added pointedly, he could see with great clarity through my struggle. It's all down to my karma, to my wanting to repeat the error of my ways and remain in the wheel of suffering. To be able to see things as clearly as he saw them, I needed to come to terms with the fact that I *relish* my suffering. I love it all, dear reader: the sleepless nights, the anguish, loss, deep sadness, and hopelessness I feel at times. I'm loving it, and I'm now heading for the nearest McDonald's.

The transpersonal bloke then informed me that this world is, you know, *impermanent*, and that all my problems stem from the fact that I am searching for something permanent. After a momentous pause, he said: I had an insight: it all relates to the death of your mother in your late teens. Your insight is spot on, I humoured him – never mind that I had made that very same point myself a moment earlier. I am familiar with and tend to be sympathetic to the general tenets of Buddhist teachings he was expounding. But I struggled to see how any of this could be applied to my everyday life as a sentient being stuck in the wheel of samsara with no valerian at hand to soothe my angst. Lacquering my mounting irritation with a coat of lyricism, I said that, in fact, this ephemeral world often made me weep with joy, that its evanescence and uncertainty made me appreciate it even more, that the fact that we are like guests on a market day, silhouettes meeting on a misty mountain path, did not make me want to reach out for third-rate consolatory metaphysics. Still, I soldiered on in the dogged hope that my hard-earned money would reap some results. Hoping against hope is what I do, as I believe with Pasolini that there is hope in desperation, and with Gramsci (loftily, undeservedly), that pessimism of the intellect must be paired with optimism of the will if I'm

to avoid becoming a sad old geezer, chip on shoulder, in the autumn of my sojourn on Earth.

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But seriously: the problem is theological. ‘God’, or its equivalent (whether shadow of the deity, creator *in absentia* or in secular garb), is traditionally seen as *transcendent* (‘climbing over’) in relation to this phenomenal world, rather than *immanent* (‘remaining within’). The latter view is politely tolerated nowadays. This is certainly an improvement compared to how they dealt with heretics in the days of yore: excommunication for Spinoza; burning at the stake for Giordano Bruno. The idea that there may be intelligence, vitality and purpose *within* matter, however aleatory or unmeasurable; the idea that matter may not be inert unless infused with ‘spirit’ is still anathema to many. From the inability to entertain this notion, all sorts of foolish practices spring up. Adorno had a field day making fun of spiritualists who inveighed against materialism but were keen to weigh the astral body. Much like those colleagues who are busy measuring empathy for their so-called ‘qualitative’ research.

There’s no way around it: the spiritual bloke who charged me £80 in exchange for a set of unsolicited, half-baked, pseudo-spiritual platitudes was simply inept. Ineptitude is not the exclusive domain of transpersonal therapy. Every theoretical approach harbours its fair share of bungling practitioners who flap their coterie’s flag and hum their parish’s mantras in the hope this will magically inoculate them from the curse du jour, be it vicarious trauma or the rocking of self-justifying professional boundaries. If I can only manage to keep that visualised bubble of luminous energy around my precious person airtight, I won’t suffer the winds of adverse fortune, nor run the risk of being told off by those fear-driven professional bodies I half-heartedly pay my membership to.

It was compelling to realise that the set of beliefs and second-hand metaphysics the spiritual bloke was profligately dumping on me have internal coherence, and that hearing them so blatantly articulated was worth every penny.

It became clear to me that reliance on transcendence is where transpersonal therapy goes wrong. Dependence on metaphysical and mystical explanations of the world and one’s place in it is precisely where things get goofed up. Big deal, you say. Aren’t *all* theories metaphysical constructs? Sure thing. But what’s unnerving about spiritualism – and organised religion, for that matter – is its barely concealed otherworldly disdain of the sweat and tears of lived experience, the priestly condemnation of those humble joys and clumsy pleasures we might be able to partake of during this shuddering interlude between birth and death. What is disappointing about the transpersonal is its bypassing of the body, of *this* body that dreams, fucks, shits, cries and desires. Desire – maladroitly mistaken as craving, and as stemming from lack rather than being the very lifeforce getting us out of bed every morning – is often the culprit in these ersatz priests’ tirades. The task, we are often told, is to cultivate ‘self-care’ by adopting a privatised and atomised form of ‘spirituality’.

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This turn towards the self – often via a call to the kind of superficial spirituality Audre Lorde eloquently decried, the kind that looks on the bright side as a way of hiding the ugliness of the status quo and the inane pursuit of profit as the only value – seems to go hand in hand with deterioration of the socio-political structure. It was true in ancient Greece and Rome, as Foucault showed. And it’s true now under a global neoliberal regime. Then as now, being less involved with political life means greater isolation. It has meant being indoctrinated and hectored by vociferous calls for ‘resilience’ – that hideously virtuous catchword the world over. Deterioration of the public sphere sadly brings about a near disappearance of the playfulness inbuilt in social interactions, and an overall psychologisation of the hierarchical structures of power.

What gets overlooked is that genuine care of the self in the Foucauldian sense is not a personal but a social practice, implying a strengthening of social relations and of mutual obligations.<sup>1</sup> It

has little to do with bubble baths or alternate nostril breathing on solitary walks in the woods near your second home. The same goes for meditation. Zen is a communal practice. The fact that decontextualised facets of the Dharma have been sold to the corporate world via the McMindfulness Industry is a disgrace. Urging overworked and underpaid employees to count their breaths before work is a crafty way to mollify their sacrosanct fury. The exploitative ingenuity with which neoliberalism has repackaged every countercultural idea is breathtaking. First it gave us paralysing angst, then sold us its alleged remedy on *Amazon* so we can finance Bezos-cum-Branson's dick-waving routines on a rocket.

The neoliberal *coup de grace* is that we now earnestly believe our misfortunes are the result of our own slipups: we chanted the wrong mantra, didn't develop resilience, didn't smile enough, or didn't get to see the right transpersonal therapist. Self-help and wisdom-while-u-wait spirituality aren't new. They go back to that Bible of Victorian liberalism that was Samuel Smiles' 1859 bestseller, aptly titled *Self-Help*. What is new is that they developed into full-blown lucrative industries. Propaganda – persuading citizens to turn into atomised units, as consumers and labourers serving the myopic needs of the moment – is hardly new. What is new is that we now swallow this pap and call it 'therapy', 'spirituality', 'mindfulness', and 'self-care'. What is tragically new is that by ostensibly taking care of our isolated self, we surrender collective action. Fields as disparate as sociology<sup>2</sup> and aesthetics<sup>3</sup> converge in noting that the genealogy of this peculiar compulsion to curate our human self-image originates in the circles of court life, where vigilant self-control and close observation of others were requisite for preserving one's status and at times for survival. Contemporary self-care is perhaps an upgraded version of this, whether we adopt the carapace of an *enterprising self* (the perception of self and others as calculating entrepreneurs jostling in a competitive market), of an *aestheticised self* (the cultured philistinism of the self-styled beautiful soul providing unconditional positive regard on tap), or the

now-pervasive *cybernetic self* (who delegates pleasure to electronic devices, barely alive in the false connections granted by *inter-passivity*).

What these various manifestations appear to have in common is a closeted puritanism, a flight from the living body and its immediate link to the world. What they all shun is the very heart of care of self: *askesis*. This Greek word, restored by Foucault, means 'exercise' and, more precisely, *discipline*, understood both as a practice of taking care of this body-mind so that we can be capable of greater solidarity. It is a *social* practice that helps us turn into citizens, rather than a private hobby that shields us from the accidents and contingencies of history. Then discipline becomes the discipline within a community struggling for an emancipatory egalitarian future. This kind of discipline does not need spiritual platitudes to sustain itself.

*Gemeinschaftsgefühl* – the communal feeling praised by Alfred Adler as the very compass of any therapy worth its salt – is one powerful manifestation of 'spirit' – of an *immanent* spirit giving us the courage needed to face the sadness and splendour of the world and the willingness to destabilise the neoliberal fantasies that keep us enslaved.

Needless to say, my first session with the transpersonal bloke was also my last.

## Notes

- 1 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 3: The Care of the Self*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1984/86.
- 2 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000.
- 3 T.J. Clark, 'Masters and fools: on Velazquez', *London Review of Books*, vol. 43, n. 18, 2021.

## About the contributor



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