

Toward an Aesthetic Androgynous Mentality in Society: A Personal View

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When I was an adolescent, I spent an unusual amount of time, indoors, alone, drawing and painting. I preferred staying inside doing art to going outside and playing games like baseball and football with other boys. The fact that drawing and painting, as traditionally and conventionally practiced, are solitary acts and done mostly in studios away from the distractions of the outer world and the, to me, boring talk of "ordinary" people didn't bother me at all.

The truth is that as much as I liked sitting alone quietly in my room idling away the hours doing art, I secretly pined for the pleasure and value of relating to other boys out-of-doors in the open air. But I knew that I was fruitlessly longing for what was impossible. I was well aware that the aggressive and fiercely competitive spirit of group sports was a contributing factor in my decision to spend so much time inside alone doing art. Besides, running counter to the so-called feminine, inward, self-expressive aspects of artistic activity with which I was comfortable, the so-called masculine, outgoing, aggressive competitiveness of team play was alarming to my mostly shy, sensitive, and introverted personality. I panicked whenever I was in situations where my undeveloped athletic ability was about to be exposed. The mere thought of going to gym class made me wretchedly ill.

To make matters worse, certain macho-oriented male classmates were already cruelly and insensitively taunting me for being shy, easily intimidated, insecure, and not displaying the swagger and build of an athlete. And if it wasn't enough for me to feel rejected by them, I had to endure the humiliation of being called degrading names like faggot, sissy, and queer by boys who believed that men who did art, who

drew, painted, danced ballet, sang opera, and wrote poetry, weren't "normal" men. I hated the injustice and the unfairness of what I had to go through from day to day; yet it seemed like there was nothing I could do nothing about it.

I didn't realize that nothing truthful or integrative was to be gained by my choosing to retreat indoors and use artistic activity to avoid confronting and coming to terms with the fears, self-doubt, anger and insecurity I was experiencing. Ill effects could only ensue. There was always the chance that I might become chronically anxious and develop agoraphobia: the fear of going outdoors, panicking in public places, and being separated from the security of the indoors (DeCrow and Seidenberg, 1983). Fortunately, in time I was able to face the anger and resentment aroused by what I perceived as the injustice being done to me and turn my outrage into something more positive and beneficial.

The artist's rebellious passion in seeing life and nature in new and fresh ways became my inspiration, and I vowed to become an artist. My lifelong goal was to develop my artistic skills and expressive powers and make significant contributions with my art for the betterment of mankind. In true rebellious spirit, I wanted to help bring about the necessary changes in the atti-

tudes, emotions, and outlook of society in general and insensitive macho-oriented males in particular. Aside from wanting to encourage other males like myself, I was honestly concerned for the mental and emotional development of men who choose to deny their sensitive, nonviolent inner expressive nature. I came to realize that, in disowning this aspect of themselves, they were actually deceiving themselves about who they totally are and allowing their consciousness to be corrupted as a result.

It seems reasonable to assume that as long as there are macho-oriented males who secretly fear that they might have a tendency to become homosexual and mistakenly identify stereotyped homosexual effeminacy with what is known symbolically as the feminine components of personality structure and mentality -- sensitive awareness, feeling-toned intuition, passivity, nonaggressiveness, and nonviolence--they will not be open to such feminine qualities in themselves or to men who choose to express them through art. They will continue to take bodily, self-protective stances against femininity in men and deride and outlaw homosexuality. Until men in general are ready to integrate and balance the masculine components of logic, cool rationality, conceptual understanding, violence, and aggressiveness with feminine traits, they will not become fully functioning, reasonable, "mentally androgynous" whole persons with the clarity and openness of response necessary for contemplating aesthetic, evolutionary and transforming visions of nature, life, and society (Wilbur, 1981).

Without such an androgynous balance in society, the social structure will continue to be masculine, repressive, and unaesthetic in character. Art works will primarily be valued as financial investments and technical feats and

used as pleasant diversions, decoration, catharsis, and builders of group morale. Feminine body-bound cognition and urges will retain their low status and continue to be denied access to the mental realms of free socio-cultural communication and understanding (Wilbur, 1981). The workplace of competition, the marketplace, will remain the dominant forum for male ego exchange, and making a living in the marketplace will be expected and necessary for all men, if not so for women.

Ironically, it was this societal masculine imperative of making a living that prompted me to realize I would never make it as a professional artist. I knew that with my shyness and particular sensitivities I would never be able to play the competitive game in the art marketplace. Besides, I couldn't run the risk of corrupting my art in order to guarantee the selling of it. For me, any attempts through my art to protest and raise society's consciousness about societal intimidation, stereotyping, and oppression had to ring true. I became an art teacher instead.

Art education seemed a more suitable arena for me in which to combine making a living with working at my lifelong social goal of bettering mankind. The classroom put me in direct and immediate contact with the persons whose emotions, attitudes, and outlook I wanted to help transform. It became a stage on which I could make visible and audible the feminine, immediately sensuous qualities of experience I believed was the students' business to face rather than shirk. In this enclosed art education setting I could become an actor, singer, and dancer and be the embodiment of the aesthetic visions of life and society I wanted to express had I become an artist.

But, it wasn't long before I realized that the aesthetic visions of life and society I was expressing

before the students, as visions, were not life and society themselves as lived outside the classroom. I wanted to go out of doors to the streets to openly, honestly, and directly create with friends and strangers the aesthetic life I always secretly wanted for myself and my fellow human beings. In the manner of performance artists and other post modern avant-gardists I wanted to be out in public with students and show them and people passing by new, refreshing, and revitalizing immediately sensuous ways of interacting with one another and making life an artistic and aesthetic event. I was eager for people to see that they do not have to always settle for that which makes society oppressive, banal, conformist, stereotyped, and stagnant.

My eagerness and enthusiasm, however, were not always enough to get me and the students to the streets with my revitalizing visions and innovative teaching approaches. I soon learned that, unlike the street artist, art teachers have something to lose when straying too far from the mainstream Western art-historical tradition and conventional art teaching practices: their jobs. It was clear to me that job security is won by staying in the classroom and confining one's teaching to art that is created in studios and exhibited in galleries and museums. However, adhering only to art that maintains the safe boundaries between art, life, and society keeps the feminine, immediately sensuous visions of life embodied in works of art from breaking through and becoming the full body of life itself. The chances are lessened of students getting to live artfully in their day-to-day interactions with the world.

Of course, students are free to bring aesthetic visions to life on their own when they are out in

nature and entering into private, quiet and restrained inner aesthetic dialogues with nature's colors, textures, movements, shapes, and spaces. They are not as free, however, to make any open and outgoing displays of spontaneous vocal sounding and expressive body movements in response to nature's sensuous offerings. They are well aware of what people's reactions would be. They also know the possible consequences if they were to try to interact with persons out on the street for no purpose other than to have an aesthetic, intuitive give and take with them. People might think that they were being sexually accosted, that their private and personal spaces were being violated.

Society is not yet ready or willing to permit its members (male members in particular) to relate to one another freely and openly out in public in ways resembling the kind of close sensuous harmonious interacting reserved for theatres, opera houses, concert and dance halls, night clubs, churches, and street festivals. While certain self-actualized mentally androgynous individuals might welcome such public relating, people in general would resist it. Their unconscious fears of losing themselves to the overpowering nature of sensuous feelings would contribute to their being embarrassed and thinking it immoral, weird, and narcissistically regressive to approach strangers on the street and experience their presences in an open, mutual, quiet and tender, free and easy dancelike exchange of body movements. The thought of strangers, or even friends, letting go, acknowledging, and becoming familiar with one another in a simultaneous, nonpurposeful, choral or operalike embracing of one another's voices would arouse their vulnerability to such states of closeness and, paradoxically, petrify them. Besides, it

would be unrealistic to expect people to suddenly put aside society's whole system of movements, gestures, and responses which facilitate civility in public and give order to an impersonal exchange between strangers and behave as if they hadn't learned it.

Nevertheless, even if the time is not yet ripe for students to go out of doors to experience and creatively explore aesthetic exchanges with persons out on the street, it is important that they have the opportunity at least to relate aesthetically to one another indoors, in the private, objective, yet no less threatening space of the classroom. I was determined to give them that opportunity. Whether or not I kept this or that particular teaching position didn't matter to me. What did matter was for students to know how they themselves would react to aesthetically approaching or being approached by other classmates -- whether or not they would be able to let go of themselves and allow the sensuous and expressive qualities of their hands, arms, legs, and voices to burst forth unrestrainedly and be exposed in front of students.

Students need to understand how their behaviors, thoughts, and feelings have been molded and conditioned by the force of cultural and historical contingencies, and how such conditioning could be the reason for any unwillingness on their part to participate in any explorations of aesthetic awareness. It would help both male and female students to become aware of whether or not their responses and reactions tend to be more or less loaded with the stereotypical attitudes of their particular sex. If they find them to be less loaded, it could mean that they are displaying a development toward an androgynous integration and balance and are on their way to allowing both masculine and feminine mentality traits to become

a part of their consciousness (Wilber, 1981). Males would become less male, and females less female. They would not let themselves be locked into the state of present-day humanity's masculine-adapted mentality into consciousness. They would be willing to go beyond the historical equating of body with femininity and mind with masculinity and see that mind can be both masculine and feminine at the same time.

Because the mind developmentally differentiates itself from the body and then suppresses it because of the threat it poses to the mind's development does not mean that feminine mentality traits are out to destroy the masculine mental realms of symbolic thought, verbal communication, culture, and ego (Wilber, 1981). Femininity does not have to be a threat to masculinity. The mind can choose to become an integral part of it and to let masculinity and femininity traits unite into a new, more advanced mode of consciousness, one that is aesthetically androgynous. In like manner, aesthetic relating can be viewed as a natural, authentic, and developmentally advanced moral form of social interaction going beyond ordinary mental-egoic, verbal and symbolic exchanges between persons. It does not have to be thought of as unmanly for men, immoral, or an uninhibited egocentric reverting to childhood practices.

For students who no longer desire to resist or repress the emergence of the basic structures of femininity consciousness and are willing to let go of their egos and participate in activities which allow for the soaring of these structures, there is the possibility that as their egos are surrendered the suppressed immediately sensuous structures of bodily being will also surface into awareness and give the students a chance to get in touch with them. The hold the social (superego) conditioning has on

consciousness will loosen up and students can have the therapeutic opportunity of realizing the effect this hold has been having upon their relation with the world and other persons (Wilber, 1981). They can see how this realization can be a beginning in an extensive and binding integrating of their egos with their bodies, and how this wholeness of ego and body can be integrated into the intuitive, androgynous, whole-bodied individual ready to come into being, the individual necessary for aesthetically contemplating other persons, works of art, and the world in general.

Students will then be able to see that the commonly accepted, present-day social and cultural ways of relating and being in the world with other persons have built into them humanity's masculine-adapted distorted and corrupt sense of what being whole with other persons is. It will be obvious that the masculine goal of striving for power, possessions, wealth, fame, comfort, sex, and knowledge is humanity's way of satisfying its unfulfilled longing for a wholeness it sacrificed, interestingly enough, in its absurd, corrupt, and diseased suppressing of its body as a way of avoiding and not coming to terms with its excessive fear of annihilation and death (Wilber, 1980).

Of course, I knew that I had no

control over whether or not interested students would follow through on their own after the semester was over and do what needs to be done to further develop their potential for becoming the aesthetically androgynous individual with the strength and confidence necessary for dealing with life's harshness and absurdities. The choice was totally theirs, as always. My responsibility was to my own self-development and for the choices I made throughout my life and my teaching career.

As it turned out, the choice I made to give students the chance to participate in activities which allow for the soaring of bodily, immediately sensuous energies and the emergence of an aesthetic consciousness was my undoing. It ended my career long before I thought it would. There came a time when another teaching job was not there for me after the loss of the last one.

I was never truly able to be the self-confident, outgoing, whole-bodied individual when dealing with conservative department chairmen and other law-and-order professional colleagues. It was only in the classroom with students that I could be that person. My habit of retreating indoors to the feminine preserve to avoid the threat of masculine egos was a habit I never broke.

References

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