

Urban Putty...
The Newsletter from The Acorn
Centre
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What's in a name?

Urban putty is the name on the colour chip from the paint store with which our office walls are painted.

Why would an enterprise named *The Acorn Centre* not want to be housed in a office with walls of urban putty and windows reaching to twelve-foot ceilings?

We see ourselves as urban gardeners, humbly and creatively and sensitively helping to give shape, form and clarity to the "urban putty" of our clients' acorn, or genius, daimon or voice.

Some of our clients are individuals, some are families and some are organizations; each, we believe, has an inner voice seeking to be heard, first by its owner, and only subsequently by others, if they are interested.

Gardening for us involves:

- tilling and enriching the soil, the micro and macro cultural ethos,
- planting seeds with appropriate questions, pictures of both end results and current reality and then an identifiable, accountable action plan, and then
- mentoring and coaching (watering, weeding, and keeping a warm presence) so that the seeds of new perspective, and new life can and do grow to their full potential.

While we are operating in an urban ethos, which naturally includes the latest technological advances, including Illustrator, and Web-Design and Web-site and "1-800" phone connections, plus CD-Rom mastering, we are nevertheless, unashamedly committed to the oldest, and still the most reliable piece of technology ever devised, the book.

On the 'inside walls' of the office, there is a wall-paper border 'shelf' of books and we believe that each of us enhances our life through continual access to the best writing available.

This requires not only a commitment to read, but also a facility and ease with interpreting the material, since it does not always or often come in a "help manual" form.

We are quite literally shocked at the number of professional graduate school graduates who rarely, if ever read anything.

Over lunch recently in answer to our question, "What have you read lately?" to a highly successful, energetic and creative entrepreneur with three academic degrees, he replied with a wry and humble smile, "Only Harry Potter to my six-year-old daughter."

Currently on our book table, for perusing by office visitors seeking a quiet place to read and reflect, we have a copy of James Hillman's *The Soul's Code*, Marion Woodman's, *The Addiction to Perfection* and Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*.

We are reading daily from Carl Jung's writings, and from the writings of thinkers, like John Ralston Saul, who lift

up the wholeness of the situation, the person, the system and who do not need to worry about the risks of applying their intuition, imagination and creativity to whatever they are examining critically.

Brief notes on books on our table:

The Soul's Code

Hillman is insightful in writing about the sad shift of psychology into statistical data, shifting the emphasis away from the human individual.

In attempting to place the spot light where he believes it belongs, Hillman explores the significance of the “acorn” the inherent ‘genius’ (not I.Q.) of each individual. It is not a chemical formula, but rather an inner guide, which seeks expression and, according to Hillman, will not be denied its voice, no matter how much we try to resist.

He also believes that much of the acting out of children in schools is less a symptom of a problem than a probable cry from the acorn which needs to be heard. Rather than sending the child into therapy, he would prefer a more enlightened approach of quizzically wondering what daimon is seeking to be heard, from within the child.

If you would like to read his book, click on our website, and we will order one for you, or you can visit your nearest bookstore for a copy.

If you would like to be part of a course, chat-group, please just let us know and we will work with you to try to meet your needs.

Addiction to Perfection

The Marion Woodman text opens with a stimulating and insightful quote, which, although based on her extensive work with anorexics and bulimics, has, we believe, much wider application. In fact, with what appears to be an epidemic among North American women of diseases stemming from the auto-immune nervous system, diseases like the lupus family of diseases (including scleroderma, fibro-myalgia and rheinoids) there could well be a significant preventive approach for others, through reading, discussing or even formally studying this text.

The quote mentioned above follows:

“Essentially, I am suggesting that many of us—men and women—are addicted in one way or another because our patriarchal culture emphasizes specialization and perfection. Driven to do our best at school, on the job, in our relationships—in every corner of our lives—we try to make ourselves into works of art. Working so hard to create our own perfection we forget that we are human beings.” (p.10)

If you would like to become part of a study group around this idea, and text, please contact us and we will work with you to meet your needs and interests.

Books about Boys and Men

Also on our book table are four titles about the raising of boys:

Raising Cain by Kindlon and Thomson

Real Boys by William Pollack

A Fine Young Man: The Wonder of Boys by Michael Gurian

These exciting books are emerging from a growing wellspring of both pragmatic and academic writing which seeks to shed light on the multiplicity of masculinities.

For too long, the macho image of young men has dominated the family and school scene, with significant damage to literally millions of young men. Men are hard-wired differently than women, and we do not need to apologize for our differences. There is a huge difference between abusive attitudes and behaviour and attitudes and behaviour which express a healthy masculinity. We are committed to helping men and women to learn about the nature of boys and young men, and to helping educational practitioners reassess their programs and attitudes for the mutual benefit of all.

If you would like more information, or would like to enroll in a learning opportunity around this theme, please contact us.

The Fifth Discipline

This exciting and challenging text is written for anyone seeking to create an environment committed to learning in any organization.

Peter Senge, and his associates have been working to develop a “systems thinking” approach to assist in the renewal of organizations for at least the last decade.

A quote from the text will serve as an introduction:

“Systems Thinking

A cloud masses, the sky darkens, leaves twist upward and we know that it will rain. We also know that after the storm, the runoff will feed into groundwater miles away, and the sky will grow clear by tomorrow. All these events are distant in time and space, and yet they are all connected within the same pattern. Each has an influence on the rest, an influence that is usually hidden from view. You can only understand the system of a rainstorm by contemplating the whole, not any individual part of the pattern.

Business and other endeavors are also systems. They, too, are bound by invisible fabrics of interrelated actions, which often take years to fully play out their effects on each other. Since we are part of that lacework ourselves, it’s doubly hard to see their whole pattern of change. Instead, we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system, and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved. Systems thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that has been developed over the past fifty years, to make the full pattern clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively.

Though the tools are new, the underlying world view is extremely intuitive; experiments with your children that they learn systems thinking very quickly.”

If you are interested in learning more about these exciting concepts, through a course designed specifically for your

organization, or your department, please contact us.

Specialization and perfection

There has been a reductionism eroding North American people individually, and society collectively for the last quarter-century at least.

While Jungian analyst Marion Woodman argues that the enemy is the patriarchy that is responsible for the two pieces of negative heritage, I take issue with her singling out “the patriarchy”. Nevertheless, I borrow gratefully from her book entitled, *The Addiction to Perfection*:

“Essentially I am suggesting that many of us—men and women—are addicted in one way or another because our patriarchal culture emphasizes specialization and perfection. Driven to do our best at school, on the job, in our relationships—in every corner of our lives—we try to make ourselves into works of art. Working so hard to create our own perfection we forget that we are human beings.” (p.10)

“Driving to get it right” is reinforced by the Lexus commercial, trying to achieve perfection in their vehicles, and attracting a highly selective niche of consumers in the process. It is reinforced by our demands on our children, in their grades in school, in our expectations that our children match or exceed the math and reading scores of their global contemporaries, so that our politicians, of every stripe, can claim that they are spending our tax dollars wisely and effectively.

There is a strange irony of history in this new “accountability” requirement. I had

never heard any politician in the previous fifty years need to justify the expenditures on schools, and yet there seems to have been a significant number of Nobel prizes, and Rhodes Scholarships, and other academic achievements on both sides of the 49th parallel, even without massive across-the-board testing.

Medical specialization

I recall a conversation some thirty years ago when my then spouse respectfully inquired from the medical specialist who had recently performed a mastoidectomy on our three-year-old daughter, “Is it possible that my daughter is suffering from allergies and they might be helping to cause these ear-aches?”

“We treat ears here!” came the irrational and irate retort from the Ear Nose and Throat (E.N.T.) specialist.

Naturally, we pursued the matter through the Family Practitioner to a referral to The Hospital for Sick Children, for allergy testing. The results confirmed our suspicions: there were at least nine significant and ubiquitous items on the list of things to which our daughter was allergic. Leaves, grass, dust, smoke were the most memorable on the list. Within a few years, we even switched houses from a gas-forced-air heating system to a “cleaner” electric system, and I eventually ceased smoking my pipe, after several years of restricting the “habit” to the basement study, with an open window.

This story has haunted me for three decades: our daughter is now a mother of one, and is expecting her second. She

took the inevitable allergy “shots” for all of her growing years and has mostly outgrown the symptoms, while continuing to take some precautions. The haunting part of the story is the reductionism of the human being by a medical “specialist” whose speciality “is so small that he can know virtually everything there is to know” (the words of another medical practitioner, himself an Internist).

The operation, thankfully, was a complete success. Thankfully, the “G.P.” was prepared to act on our request for a referral for of parents of young children whose families are not involved in the medical or hospital field, where the parents are afraid of the doctors who treat them?

What happened to the whole person?

More importantly, as we seek to bring some “health” back into the Canadian health care system, what are the ethical, political and social pressures on the medical schools in this country which, if the perceptions of my medical friends are even partially accurate, have now resorted to a complete reductionism of the human being into specialties, including the specialty of psychiatry?

When are the medical schools going to acknowledge their complete cave-in to the “gods” of specialization (and the concomitant reductionism) and their failure to teach the whole person to their graduates, including their Family Practitioners?

It is not so long ago that I listened to a Family Practitioner who, in recalling his “education” in medical school

indicated that not more than 10% of his time in school was spent on psychology and on psychosomatic illnesses and yet in his practice, at least 60% of his patients were coming to his office for such “problems”.

Has there been a conclusive and definitive study done on Canadian health care users to determine the current percentages? The Canadian public, trained as it is, by the medical profession, brings all the aches and pains of their bodies, minds and spirits to the doctors’ offices, without being able to discern the difference between the psychosomatic and the non-psychosomatic symptoms!

As the flood of pharmacological interventions increases, by doctors prescribing a pill when a genuine conversation would significantly improve the situation (but for which there is not a sufficient billing entry for the system, even if the doctor were trained in “listening” and empathy), the system places the Family Practitioner in the unenviable position of dispensing “knee-jerk” medicine. It is an insult to the medical schools, who are not doing their job, to the doctors who are unable to do their jobs effectively, and to the patients whose education is left to another “form and function” of the society: the schools, colleges and universities.

M.I.T. suicide suit

A similar reduction is evident in these institutions, when an M.I.T. co-ed is diagnosed with serious emotional problems, and is sent home “for a rest” without mentioning to her parents, nor permitting her school medical treatment

team to disclose to her parents, her serious desire to commit suicide. Now that she is dead, the parents have brought a law suit against the university for failing to inform them of the seriousness of the problem.

“At the heart of this case is the issue of confidentiality!” explains the family attorney on national television. (Incidentally, the family is not asking for a monetary settlement but rather a formal debate on the issues of school responsibility, when confidentiality is so obviously not the most effective policy.)

Zero tolerance / perfection

Is this an incidence of the convergence of perfection and specialization? Literal adherence to the letter of the policy of confidentiality, another form of “zero tolerance” which we find in evidence whenever the body politic is sufficiently disturbed to demand a serious penalty, is neither appropriate nor is it mature.

Where’s the judgement?

Judgement, that capacity to find and enter the grey area of the situation, that capacity to tolerate the uncertainty of risk when we know that we would have another take the risk, if it were our daughter, the capacity to get out of our car when we find a road tragedy, if we are medically, or pastorally trained, regardless of the consequences, seems to be fading fast among those people we would naturally expect to have the best training for its deployment.

This is not merely a consequence of “the patriarchy” that ubiquitous giant of a mythology against which all the feminist rhetoric has been burning, these past three decades. Making mistakes, and taking responsibility for them, without having to unleash a team of powerful lawyers, and without having to withdraw from certain medical procedures like delivering a newborn, because the insurance premiums are too high, seems to have become at least as eroded as the vanishing species of birds from many natural habitats.

Those professionals at M.I.T. who treated the co-ed needed to be empowered to inform the parents, or to arrange a joint family meeting at which the seriousness of the student’s condition was fully disclosed to all who could help. At least, if that had been accomplished, and the co-ed still insisted on taking her own life, all the surviving parties would know that they had done their part to prevent the tragedy.

“Gutting the definition of being human?”

We are savagely, unconsciously and therefore irresponsibly, and with impunity gutting the definition of what it means to be a human being. We are using the best brains of the society as complicitous forces in our savagery. In fact, we are rewarding our “best brains” with our highest academic awards for their very “mastering” of our heinous reductionism. Is this one of the products of our cyber-virtual-addiction?

I believe it is.

Feminist/whiz-kid/perfectionist

Several years ago, I was assigned a supervisor in a graduate program, at a respectable Canadian university. She had graduated in the first Maths Physics and Chemistry, from that same university, class using the new technology. We were both involved in establishing programs in what today would be called “soft services” or “human relations” and while I had a poetry background and she a computer background, and the more obvious differences in “cultural perspective” played themselves out in her pursuit of testing instruments to “categorize” people for the purpose of “getting to know them better” I wanted to sit and talk with them, observe them, feel their presence and let the experience “into” my filtering and absorption processes.

Hers was a much more clinical, intellectual “assessment” of the person, and its statistical groupings were very important for her. A raging feminist, computer whiz-kid, a daughter of European first generation parents, her father having achieved considerable commercial success in the housing sector in North Toronto since mid-century, and now an ideologue who had risen among her feminist contemporaries as one of “theirs”, I saw her as the antithesis of what was needed in the “care” business. Nevertheless, her superiors were not about to voice concerns, even if they shared mine, because to do so would risk charges of discrimination.

Have skill sets become the new human identity?

Both the feminist and the E.N.T. specialist represent the cutting edge of the new technology graduates; both were and are engaged in the “care” of other humans. Both have a skill-set which leaves me looking for their person, whenever I am in their company. They are the best examples I know of function substituting for identity. Naturally, both of them find me chaotic, confusing, questioning, and even challenging, and not necessarily happily.

Both would fit the hiring needs of the Human Resource Specialist of a small Ontario university, whose writing in a daily newspaper indicates that she believes all hiring processes involve the hiring of competencies, not persons. She rejects the use of “gut feelings” as unreliable, and of intuition for the same reason. (Incidentally, it will surprise no one, that the psychology department of this same small university does not permit the teaching of the work of Jung in their department, for the disputable reason that only the empirically verifiable is scientific, and therefore worthy of teaching.

Science vs scientia

The reduction of hires to competencies, and the teaching of competencies, and the pervasive influence of reductions of problems to components which can be managed by the new technology, while opening up access to all learning opportunities, has, simultaneously, seemed to accelerate the perception of the “quality” of that learning, or at least

much of the science, and the management science (since it is only science that has ascendancy in our economy) as we see nearly all fields of academic study collapsed into something commonly called science, not *scientia*, knowledge.

We have lost the original definition of *scientia*, and we now worship at the altar of its reduction, something that most of the giants of earlier times would laugh at, if they found us calling it “knowledge”, never mind the distance it keeps from “wisdom”.

We need new dialogue

In order to recover some of the energy required to ask the questions about the violence we have inflicted on our best learning institutions, there is a significant need for dialogue on the subjects which bring the theoretician and the poet, the futurist and the actuary, the systems thinker and the composers, the linguists and the playwrights to the same tables.

A most recent discussion on CNN of a new edition of the Bible, from the International Bible Society found two “scholars” exchanging barbs about the nature of the Greek word under consideration. There was no mention of the context of the original, or of the “*sitz em leben*” as at least one form of biblical scholarship dubbed it. Was this a paradigm for our culture?

Only the literal definition of the word seems to matter, nor the context, from which much of the meaning is derived. If our pursuit is power, and if the shortest way to “appear” to gain power is to reduce the journey by

removing the bumps of confusion and chaos and slippery roads, and avalanches, and land-slides, and decaying animals, and young fawns that dart out into our paths when we are travelling at 100+ km/hr. and the questions about allergies, and the questions about context, and the questions about the interconnection of all the parts and all the systems, and the question about the “whole person” or the “gestalt” because after all, “that is so much psychobabble” then we will all pay a heavy price, and we will all share in the responsibility through our complicitous silence.

Implications of a segmented Perspective

There are many implications of the balkanization of our perspective into components. The most obvious is the loss of a wholeistic picture of each situation, each person, our own person and the kind of balance and discipline which is needed in order to maintain that balance:

- The schools burrow further and further into the isolated mastery of specific skills, including state testing, without sufficient regard for the whole development of the child.
- The capital system reduces each of us to a consumer, a transaction, whose needs and desires are micromanaged by more and more market surveys.
- The politicians now have cover for their every word, making leadership another Orwellian paradox, of followership.
- The doctors are imprisoned in their billing rut, making it seem impossible for them to act as

much more than short-order plumbers, or electricians, or pharmacies, without the burden of the additional overhead of inventory and staff.

Those teaching teachers in training have been heard to say that their students are not interested in the theory behind their lectures, but only in a quiver of arrows which they are confident will work, no matter what situation they may face in the classroom.

John Ralston Saul is trying!

John Ralston Saul, a Canadian cultural historian has written about this phenomenon in *The Unconscious Civilization* (1995), arguing for a return to recognition, respect and even full deployment of the human faculties of creativity, imagination, ethics, intuition without the trashing of reason. He continues his argument in his latest book, *Equilibrium*.

French historian Beurat

The French writer Beurat, fired from the Sorbonne, back in the 1960's for his heretical writing, the theme of which is that in writing history, we must include anthropology, economics, sociology, literature, science, architecture, in fact all of the academic disciplines, would take heart from a minimal restoration to beginning respectability.

The cliché of the expert as one who “knows more and more about less and less” or as the one who looks the wrong way down the telescope, has its own

history. Greek academic standards, based on the then-ground-breaking work of Aristotle, have been brought into the academic institutions, and sanctified as absolute.

Inter-disciplinary studies are not encouraged, yet in many universities, for the simple reason that each department and discipline holds tenaciously to its “standards” of expectations, and everyone knows the oxymoron of the Engineering student in the English class.

Only another plea for liberal education?

For some this will sound like a plea for a return to the liberal education, for everyone. As a simplistic reading of the piece, that is one possible response.

There are others:

- requiring gestalt thinking and perception to become an integral part of all academic programs;
- requiring all students to link with a peer from another language and culture, and communicating with that peer over the entire length of the undergraduate program as a condition of graduation from all programs;
- a minimum of one novel from every student in every program as a condition of graduation;
- a minimum of one extensive piece of oral history by every student in every program, as part of the requirements for graduation.

It is not the content, or the specialization, or the perfection that are the real dangers; it is their becoming so ingrained as an

essential part of the lifestyle that we are sanitizing risk and error out and fossilizing fear into the system.

Journalism education needing overhaul

The education of the press also requires an overhaul. The making of headlines, through the exaggeration of the bizarre in human behaviour signals the triumph of the tabloid mind-set. The elevation of the newsmaker to the status of instant rock-star, for the purpose of knocking him or her off the pedestal creates delusions of illusions, attempting to substitute for clear perception.

Even the phrase, as aphorism, “be in the moment” has been so reduced that it has become “Oprahfied” And that is the greatest danger of all, that good ideas and projects are cynically viewed to be nothing but the window dressing of the “do-gooders” who themselves drown under the waves of derision of the “real” people, the executives, and the barracudas and the sharks of the corporate towers.

That Arthur Anderson is suffering a loss of clients from its engagement in the Enron affair, is only one of the most exciting benefits to emerge from the debacle. It is the mind-set of the money-changers, now besetting every institution from church to theatre, from school to corner store...as if profit were the most important purpose, and balance sheet the measure of success and failure of every family and organization, including city hall.

In human life, “The greatest violence is the reductionism we commit against each other,” claimed the sister in the family violence workshop. And we

would add that the greatest violence is the reductionism of stereotyping, committed each day in our off-the-cuff remarks about other people where the racism, the bigotry, the hatred, the superiority and the condescending patronizing flows like a river of lava from the volcanoes of our repressed anger and frustration, and perception of loss of control.

Of course, we are disillusioned by the seemingly small contribution we each can make individually, especially when the sanctioned voices are so sanitized and purified and perfected that all genuine dialogue has disappeared from even the most controversial of media and intellectual sources.

Authenticity regained?

This process is life-defying. The journey back to a kind of authenticity will be long, hard and fraught with monsters and storms of resistance because the illusion of comfort and of “meaning” which has been substituted for authentic encounter in the workplace and in the home and in the schools and in the health care facilities and in the government and in the universities has covered all pain with the illusion of the drugs of many other conveniences to which North America is, without question, addicted.

So where do we begin?

We begin with language, and the invitation to confront the illusions of the manageable stereotypes. We are not trying to eliminate the paradoxes and the ironies, but rather to gather strength and new insight from their dark crevices. It has always been the case that the shoemaker’s children have holes in their

shoes, and for that we can all smile even while we drive to his shop to have him repair our shoes. We have never considered finding him a fool because of his inattention to his family's shoes.

The triumph of cynicism, in the most subtle and sophisticated form has come through the triumph of images and of rationalizations which have gone unquestioned for too long. Let's look at only one, today, but there are likely to be more in the days ahead. We borrow from Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline* and the accompanying fieldbook.

Have you ever thought about how the stories we tell each other determine the kind of cultural environment we are creating? Listen to the words from the section "universal language" from *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*:

"We believe systems thinking is more powerful as a language, augmenting and changing the ordinary ways we think and talk about complex issues. The subject-verb-object constructions of most Western languages (where A causes B) makes it difficult to talk about circumstances in which A causes B while B causes A, and both continually interrelate with C and D. The tools of systems thinking—causal loop diagrams, archetypes, and computer models allow us to talk about interrelationships more easily, because they are based on the theoretical concept of feedback processes."

Stay with us, there's more...this time about FedEx!

"At Federal Express, work with systems thinking in a pilot learning laboratory has led to unprecedented improvements in relationship between the company

and a number of large customer accounts. These customers began to notice that their Fed Ex reps were more open, more willing to collaborate, and more capable of helping to solve strategic issues."

Want more?

Another quote from the fieldbook:

"At its broadest level, systems thinking encompasses a large and fairly amorphous body of methods, tools and principles, all oriented to looking at the interconnectedness of forces, and seeing them as part of a common process. The field includes cybernetics and chaos theory; gestalt therapy; the work of Gregory Bateson, Russell Ackoff, Eric Trist, Ludwig von Bertalanffy and the Santa Fe Institute, and the dozen or so practical techniques for process mapping flows of activity at work.

All of these diverse approaches have one guiding idea in common: that behaviour of all systems follows certain common principles, the nature of which are being discovered and articulated."

What is an archetype?

(Notes from *The Essential Jung*, selected and introduced by Anthony Storr)

It was Jung's intimate acquaintance with the phenomena of schizophrenia which led him to postulate a "collective" unconscious. He found that delusions and hallucinations, which often seem to be variations of similar themes, could seldom be entirely explained as products of the patient's personal history. Jung's extensive knowledge of comparative religion and of mythology led him to detect parallels with psychotic material

which argued a common source: a myth-producing level of mind which was common to all men.

Jung described the collective unconscious as consisting of mythological motifs or primordial images to which he gave the name “archetypes”.

Archetypes are not inborn ideas but:

“... typical forms of behaviour which, once they become conscious, naturally present themselves as ideas and images like everything else that becomes a content of consciousness. Archetypes have an organizing influence on images and ideas. Archetypes are not themselves conscious, but seem to be like underlying ground themes upon which conscious manifestations are sets of variations. Their presence is felt as “numinous”; that is, of profound spiritual significance.”

Feedback?

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