
No life has ever been *saved*

Robin Shoheit shares his reflections on COVID-19

How many times have you heard the expression 'X number of lives have been saved'? Could it be the most gigantic hoax? No life has ever been saved. Death has just been postponed. The two statements are very different, and it is the purpose of this article to explore the significance of this in relation to the pandemic.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus is quoted as saying:

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it (Matthew 16:25)¹

In this COVID-19-induced scramble to save lives, are we, perhaps, losing them? Not just because of the lockdown, but because psychically we are in lockdown all our lives when we live in fear. The virus has exposed this self-deception mercilessly. As long as we project the fear that is always in us onto the virus, I believe we will not learn its lessons. It is the same projection mechanism that sometimes blames others (eg people from other cultures), leading to fear. Have we done the same with the virus?

In this article, I will explore how projection both creates, and fuels, separation and fear, and look at the value of recognising our interconnectedness. In acknowledging

that we might be more than just separate individuals, we have the opportunity to shift the emphasis from saving lives to living them together, as part of a greater whole.

Before I go on, I want to own an agenda. I grew up with a very fearful mother, who tried to protect us from this 'hostile' outside world. I know how loving she was, but I did not feel safe. I resorted to finding a way to understand: using my intuition and insight to create my own sense of safety on an internal level. Wanting people to feel safer, through inquiry, has become part of my life's work, stemming, as is often the case, from an earlier wound. In this article, I am suggesting that external control, like lockdown and social distancing, when not supported by inner work, will perhaps only work in the short term. There is a place for external methods, but understanding the psychological processes at work can help us to gain a different kind of immunity.

Projection

In February 2019, I was fortunate enough to find a rented flat in which to write. It was as near to perfect as I could wish, with stunning views. On the day I got the keys, I sat in the sitting room and was consumed with self-hatred. The voices went something like this. 'You are so selfish. You are taking not only time away from the family, but money. You always do just what you want. No thought for others. Really, this writing is just an excuse to get away from responsibility. You are not, and never will be, a writer.'

I am telling this story because I realised, intuitively, that the way out, for me anyway, was gratitude. I think it is not possible to be in attacking energy of any kind and be grateful at the same time. I was able to look out and give thanks and get on with writing. But, more than that, I asked myself why this violent self-attack happened. And I realised that, because my wife had not blocked my path and I had got more or less exactly what I wanted, there

was no-one and nothing to project onto. No-one to blame. I could not make my wife 'other' for trying to stop me. I was left with myself and, underneath this persona, Robin, was this self-hatred that was always there. And, it was not just the voice of my father. He gave it form, the words, but I believe the energy was archetypal. I know it lies somewhere in virtually everyone. I can't prove it, of course, but I see it behind perfectionism, the need to prove oneself, ambition, blame, comparisons and so many, apparently unrelated, psychological mechanisms. I have come to believe that all hatred is self-hatred, ingeniously projected so we don't feel it. In this way, we perpetuate it, instead of facing it, as I was forced to do, for what we project still lies within us.

Projection is a quadruple whammy. First, it makes others into enemies and, thus, increases blame, stress, and conflict in the world. Second, because we have found fault with them, we will consciously or unconsciously fear retaliation. Third, it makes us feel justified. We believe our projections. This gives rise to all sorts of behaviours, which we might find unacceptable, or downright morally reprehensible, if we had not projected. And, finally, we learn nothing. What is unacceptable still resides in us, waiting for the next projection. I very much like the Pogo quote, 'We have seen the enemy and they is us.'

By disowning parts of ourselves, and joining a kind of mass hypnosis or trance, we may have consented to feeling more disempowered than we need. It seems the fear of the virus is putting us into survival mode, forcing us to lose our ability to ask searching questions. Like the question author, Charles Eisenstein, has asked: 'How much of life do we want to sacrifice at the altar of security?'¹²

In the face of our helplessness around the virus, we can resort to an obsession with control rather than giving space to inquiry and using our minds creatively.

Beyond separation

I am beginning to believe that what also fuels our fears is a belief in separation, making the separate 'I' the centre of the universe. This is a rejection of the idea of our interconnectedness.

The *Upanishads*, an ancient Indian holy text, includes a saying: 'Where there is another, there is fear.' If I see you as 'other', denying our interconnectedness, then I will feel on guard, fearing potential attack, and I – and the society I live in – will become preoccupied with safety. This is achieved by making the 'other' dangerous and trying to eradicate it – a person, a people or an illness. We even have war on terror to try and keep ourselves safe. As Burchell writes:

'The psychological manifestation of this convincing, collective hallucination of separateness culminates in our unquestioning belief in "Safety" as one of the new gods.'³

In *In Love with Supervision. Creating Transformative Conversations*, Joan Shohet and I write about the opposite of this:

'Many of us have had an experience of realising there is more than just this personal 'I' and inevitably it comes with an experience of some kind of peace, awe, gratitude. Almost invariably the personal 'I' reclaims its kingdom, and as this happens you and the world become other again, but somewhere inside us this experience lives on.'⁴

Perhaps the virus offers the potential to transcend separateness. We continue:

'We have chosen to identify ourselves as separate individuals. This is so apparently obvious that to even question it seems absurd. There is an exercise where you sit opposite someone and say, "Tell me who you are" repeatedly. You go past the layers – I am a man, father, therapist, husband and eventually you get to a point where the mind has nowhere to go. When this happened to me, I did not know whether I was in the world or the world was in me. There seemed no separation although there was still an "I" but it was so much vaster than anything I (the separate I) could have imagined. In that state of being, fear would have no place. It would be like the fingers of the hand being frightened of each other, or each finger saying I am the only one who counts, or, even worse, wanting to cut the other fingers off as each finger might feel threatened by the others.'⁵

By recognising our interconnectedness, we can undo the projections that separate us and, potentially, lessen our fear.

In my work as a supervisor, a way of framing a problem is to look at what has been brought to supervision as 'other'. The job of the supervisor is to help the supervisee become more present to this other, so that he, or she, can join this otherness, so it is no longer 'other'. In doing so, the apparent difficulty will resolve itself, because the difficulty was not in the situation but *in the creation of otherness*:

'Conflict and suffering arise from introjected misperceptions which engender and then project the feeling of being a separate self... They are messengers which signal that misperception, introjection and projection are taking, or have taken, place. Conflict and suffering are not something to get rid of. Rather they are sign posts that point out the underlying misperception that is holding the belief in separation in place. When this belief is exposed and deconstructed, conflict and suffering disappear, having served their ultimate purpose.'⁵

This quote seems to point to the insight that whatever is disturbing us is an opportunity to see how we have separated from a person or situation. An enemy is an extreme version of the separation that goes on much of the time.

Byron Katie⁶ also gave what I consider a radical example of joining, of not seeing separation.

Katie was visiting a woman with cancer, and as she was leaving, the woman said to her, 'I love you, Katie.' Katie replied, 'Not possible. Until you love your cancer, you can't love me.' In Katie's mind there is no separation between her and cancer.

I want to stress that if the time came, I might well not be able to live this myself. But I want to convey the idea that once we have separated from *anything*, we will be in fear of it.

Denial of death – or no life can be saved

Throughout this virus pandemic, we are confronted and affronted by the spectre of death. And, returning to the quote from Matthew, in this denial we are losing our lives. A life run by fear is not remotely a fully lived life. Perhaps this is why we escape into short-term pleasure or addictions. The denial of death, and the control and fear that come with it, haunt us. It is a battle we can never win, and the medical profession can be caught between the

extremes of impotence and omnipotence, both fuelled by fear. We, the patients, feel we are entitled to have our lives saved by the latest and best.

In a Mesopotamian tale, retold by W Somerset Maugham, the angel of death appeared to a man and said that he was coming for him the next day at noon. The man, panic stricken, got on his horse and rode and rode as fast as he could for 24 hours, almost non-stop, to get as far away as possible. At the appointed hour, the angel of death appeared and said 'I knew I would find you here.'⁷

If I see you as 'other', denying our interconnectedness, then I will feel on guard, fearing potential attack and I – and the society I live in – will become preoccupied with safety. This is achieved by making the 'other' dangerous and trying to eradicate it – a person, a people or an illness

Perhaps the 24 hours might have been better spent saying goodbye to his loved ones and getting his house in order.

Conclusion

There is a story that I grew up with that encourages us to think about the way we view a problem. It is a story about regret, but it can be applied to other situations where we take excessive precautions that cannot work.

In a village in Asia Minor, the villagers were full of regret. It was a way of life. There were comments like, 'If only we had planted wheat instead of barley. We would have been so wealthy now', or 'If only we had given permission for a road to be built through our village. We would have been on the silk trail from India.' And so on. The village elder decided that they would bury the word 'if', so all the villagers dug a huge trench and buried it. After they had finished, they had a magnificent celebration and all was going well until one person turned to another and said 'If only we had buried it a bit deeper.'

Measures like lockdown will become increasingly restrictive. These external solutions will never be psychically 'deep' enough, as the source is the fear in us.

The Bible quote from Matthew at the beginning of this article is pointing to the futility of control. To complete the quote:

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. Matthew 16:25¹

I think this is pointing to the need to surrender to something or someone greater: saving a life in a very different way to how it is regularly voiced. This is not about Jesus or Christianity, but an acknowledgment of something more than us – love, truth, source, God, consciousness, whatever we call it – which might always be there. Recognising our interconnectedness, and accepting there might be something bigger than us, could lessen our fear and be a source of protection. As Mohammed said, 'Trust God and tether your camel.'⁸ So, we take our precautions externally and do the work internally. And, in being willing to lose our life to something more, we gain it. It is one way of framing a possible lesson of the virus: moving us from separation to connection, a journey from fear to love.

Biography



Robin Shohet has been working in the field of psychotherapy, supervision and training for over 40 years. He would like to acknowledge the influence of *A Course in Miracles* and *The Work of Byron Katie* in his life.

References

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