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Learning from the dirt mover

I would like to make a few comments about Dave Evans entertaining and instructive vignette in the March, 1998 ASCAP.

First, he seems to be using a reframing technique similar to that used by Gurdjieff, and which I described in the same issue of ASCAP. He is reframing "adverse experience" as "learning experience". This is presumably the message Walt Whitman is giving in the lines that Dave Evans quotes and which could bear repeating:

"Have you learned great lessons
from those who reject you,
and brace themselves against you?
or who treat you with contempt,
or dispute the passage with you?"

Those who learn great lessons from such experiences as Dave had with the satellite dish are building up their true selves, or their "will" as Gurdjieff put it. In my personal metaphor they are developing their "owl in the head", the owl standing for wisdom. Another way of reframing adverse experience is to acknowledge that "it will make a fantastic story", and so the worse the experience, the better the story.

Second, I would dispute the idea that evolutionary theory leads to the conclusion that human beings are basically selfish. We know that our genes are selfish, but we do not interact with each others' genes. We deal with their personalities, which have evolved in the context of group living and prolonged, intensive, repetitive social interaction. People need to live in groups, and, to stay in groups, let alone to succeed, you need to be liked and respected by the other people in the group. And you do not achieve this liking and respect by being selfish. The group by its norms, standards, beliefs and world-view fashions individuals who may be inclined to be selfish into good citizens, who put the group and its other members before their own selfish interests. Anyone who lacks the capacity to be fashioned in this way stands out like a sore thumb and is either expelled from the group or allowed to stay with diminished prestige and diminished reproductive opportunity. This process would occur with selection at the level of the individual, and would be accelerated by selection at the level of the group. It applies to groups which practice hedonic (prestige) competition rather than agonistic competition (see my essay on "Agonistic versus prestige competition" in the September, 1995 ASCAP).

Third, we can learn from our experience of post-traumatic stress disorder that reminders of trauma can be themselves traumatic. Therefore, something needs to be done about that hole (assuming the dirt-mover still hasn't filled it in). Why not make it into an ornamental pond?

Fourth, one must comment on the fact that the antagonist in the vignette is a "dirt mover". I do not know whether this is a fiction in order to conceal his true identity for reasons of confidentiality, or whether he was in truth a mover of dirt. Dirt has certain connotations to an English ear. For instance, when I was doing paediatrics a mother brought her little boy to the out-patient clinic suffering from a boil on the perineum. "Where is the boil?", I asked the mother. "Down there" she replied, "between his dirt-box and his thruster." Dirt is a synonym for shit. Are we meant to take on board the unspoken message that the satellite buyer was "a shit"? In India, of course, those who move shit are untouchables. Even if the buyer really was a mover of dirt (what we here would call soil, and I don't mean "night-soil"), I think the emphasis on his occupation in the vignette may be one way of expressing the author's aggression to his antagonist. Would we have felt differently about him if he had been a "landscape gardener"?

Lastly, perhaps the main lesson from this tale is that you have to get the sequence right when you are doing more than one related thing. If Dave had waited to cut down the tree which blocked the satellite dish until after the dish had been removed, he wouldn't have been so impatient to get rid of it so quickly - and wouldn't have been tempted into Kafka's true sin (impatience) and so would have waited another week for the dirt-mover to collect the dish. But then he would have missed out on a great learning experience.