

CHAPTER 2

The Crisis of Individualism

The cultural ideal of the Western industrialized world is the self-made, self-sufficient, autonomous individual who stands by himself or herself, not needing anyone else (except for sex) and not beholden to anyone for anything. He or she may consult a doctor or a therapist or a lawyer, but because these services are purchased, one can still see oneself as autonomous. Having one's own money is of course crucial to maintaining this kind of independence. Hence the careerism and feverish busyness that characterize the autonomous lifestyle.

This is the ideal that people live and work for. It is their goal in life, and they will sacrifice anything to achieve it. This is how you "get a life for yourself." This is how you discover your identity. As one author has described it: "The Western world maintains that an individual attains authentic identity only if clearly separated from others and from the rest of the enveloping world." Freedom and happiness are equated with independence and self-sufficiency.

From the point of view of all other cultures in the world, past and present, this is simply unintelligible. In other cultures, the person who is separated and isolated from the rest of the community would be regarded as very unfortunate. Interdependence, social coherence, and reliance upon one another are highly appreciated cultural values. In Africa we say: "A person becomes a person through other people." In other words,

your identity depends upon the family, the friends, and the community who relate to you and to whom you relate.

There have been plenty of people in the past with inflated egos—kings, conquerors, and other dictators—but in the Western world today the cultivation of the ego is seen as the ideal for everyone. Individualism permeates almost everything we do. It is a basic assumption. It is like a cult. We worship the ego.

Western individualism is spreading throughout the world. It is part of neo-liberal globalization and it is destroying other more communitarian cultures in its wake. In Africa we are witnessing the inevitable growth of individualism, especially in economic matters. This is not said by way of blame or condemnation. Western culture has developed in this way and we will need to ask how it happened. It doesn't help to blame anyone for it.

Individualism itself is not new. What is new, and is one of the important signs of our times, is the growing awareness that narcissistic individualism is psychologically, socially, politically, economically, spiritually, and ecologically *destructive*.

The Destructiveness of Individualism

From 1979 to 1984 a team of sociologists led by Robert Bellah did extensive research into the psychosocial effects of individualism in the United States. Their findings were shocking. The effects included alienation, loneliness, lovelessness, unhappiness, and an inability to maintain relationships.²

In this individualistic culture, therapists and counselors have seen their task as that of helping the individual to develop his or her ego in order to reach the great Western ideal of *self-fulfillment*. Today psychologists are beginning to realize that this leads only to self-centeredness and narcissism, which are themselves the cause of mental illnesses both neurotic and psychotic.³ The self-centered individualist loses touch with reality.

It is now recognized that the “me-generation” is thoroughly unhealthy. This is the generation of Westerners who were born during the baby boom after the Second World War and grew up in the flower power protests of the 1960s. Their aim in life was, and often still is, self-fulfillment. Today authors like Ken Wilber see such self-fulfillment as a debilitating form of self-centeredness. He calls it “boomeritis.”⁴

Many of today's young people feel that, despite all this individualism, their egos have been suppressed. They continue to claim the freedom to do their own thing, to be themselves, to express themselves, to assert themselves, to “get attitude.”

Too often the search for spirituality, especially among youth in the Western world, is undertaken in a manner that is also self-centered. A thoroughly individualist spirituality is proving to be counter-productive. More and more people who have been reflecting on their own experience of spirituality are discovering what the mystics have always said, that we must undertake the painful and difficult task of moving beyond our self-centeredness, our individualism, and our egos. Programs that ignore this truth and offer a self-fulfillment or follow-your-bliss kind of spirituality are totally misleading. Moreover, too many of the people who set themselves up as gurus have swollen egos themselves. Such programs and gurus are not able to satisfy a genuine hunger for spirituality.

In Europe, North America, and Australia, churches are empty. On the other hand, in the rest of the world and especially in Africa the churches are packed to overflowing and both Christianity and Islam are growing fast. This is not simply a return to the past, to fundamentalism. My guess is that it is a search for spirituality and healing in the solidarity of a community.

In Africa and in the African diaspora people huddle together in church services to support one another and to feel the oneness of harmonized singing and praying. In Western-type

churches everybody sits as far as possible from everybody else. There is no huddling together.

It is the difference between *ubuntu* (becoming a person in and through other people) and Western individualism (becoming a person by being as independent as possible of other people). Some of us believe that we find God together, while others believe we must search alone. The former might want to be together in a church or some other worshiping community. The latter try to develop their spirituality in private. In this regard, David Tacey warns us about what he calls “the appalling loneliness that a privatized spirituality can bring.”⁵

There is a similar problem in many of the struggles for justice. What more and more people are discovering is that without personal liberation or inner freedom, our hard-won social freedoms are undermined and perverted by selfish individualism. If the people who have been socially liberated are not also liberated from their own egos, their personal selfishness, they are in danger of repeating—in another form—the very oppression and cruelty against which they have fought.

While the concept of human rights has contributed enormously to a more just world, it too is a somewhat individualistic concept. Human rights are the rights of the individual. There is a growing recognition that we need to be working for something more like the common good.⁶ Our culture of individualism even in struggles for justice often sees the common good as working against the interests of the individual. That is not true. The common good is always in the best interests of the individual too.

Worse still is the abuse of the right to private ownership. The right to private ownership makes it illegal for a poor person to steal a loaf of bread but perfectly legal for a rich man to hoard more food and other resources than he or she can ever make use of. Rampant individualism leads to the limitless accumulation of wealth by some while billions of others live in misery and die of starvation. The rich justify this blatant injus-

tice by claiming their right to own as much as they like, no matter how many others are deprived of the bare necessities of life. “I earned it all without breaking any laws,” they say. “It is *mine*, and I am not responsible for the lives of other people.” This must be one of the most destructive consequences of individualism. It destroys millions of people every day.

The tragic irony of Western individualism is that it now threatens the very freedom it hoped to achieve.⁷ Individualism and separation have led us, in the words of Robert Bellah, “to the brink of disaster.”⁸ Nowhere is the destructiveness of selfish individualism manifested more clearly, dangerously, and dramatically than in our destruction of the environment. Ecologically, Western individualism has brought us to the edge of chaos.

The Destruction of the Earth

In 1995, Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin wrote a book entitled *The Sixth Extinction: Biodiversity and Its Survival*. They had made a study of the mass extinctions that had taken place on planet earth over millions of years including the most famous of them, the fifth extinction, when the dinosaurs were wiped out. That was some sixty-five million years ago. The sixth extinction is the one we are heading for now, only this time it is unlikely to be caused by an asteroid smashing into the earth. This time it will be the result of human selfishness.

We all know the story of environmental destruction: the pollution of rivers and oceans, the destruction of forests, the erosion of topsoil, the rapid desertification of parts of the earth, the greenhouse effect created by the burning of fossil fuels, the destruction of species, the over-fishing along our coasts, the effects of the population explosion in so-called developing nations, the dangers of nuclear waste and the unknown and perhaps irreversible effects of genetic engineering. A veritable litany of woes.

We have been talking about these threats for decades. Beginning in 1962 with Rachel Carson's book, *The Silent Spring*, we have been discovering new ways in which our earth and our species are dying. There has been some response to the warnings, but nowhere near enough to stem the tide.⁹

The most recent scientific discovery, however, is not about some future catastrophe. It is about the disaster that is already happening—*global warming*. I want to focus on this because I believe that it is one of the outstanding signs of our times.

Global Warming

Scientists tell us that the burning of fossil fuels (oil, coal, and gas) emits carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. We have been doing this since the Industrial Revolution and at an ever-increasing rate. At present, such emissions send seven billion tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere every year.

All of this is collecting around the globe like a giant blanket that has the effect of warming the earth beyond the normal temperatures of the past. It is known as the greenhouse effect. There has always been a thin, delicately balanced blanket of carbon dioxide up there, but since the Industrial Revolution we have increased the thickness of this blanket by 30 percent.

To some, global warming may sound innocent enough. But scientists, and especially meteorologists, tell us that it will cause—and is already causing—extreme weather conditions: devastating droughts in some places, killer floods in other places, widespread failure of agriculture and therefore food scarcity, and, most destructive of all for the human race, the rising of sea levels everywhere.

Sea levels will rise, first of all, because the warming of the oceans will expand the volume of water. More dramatically, however, the melting of icebergs and icecaps in the Arctic and Antarctic will produce sea levels that are many feet higher than

at present. That will mean the end of all our coastal cities from New York and London to Lagos, all the low-lying islands on the planet, and practically the whole of countries like Bangladesh.

At first it was thought that such results were still a long way off. But at a conference of scientists (not environmental activists) called together by the British Government (not the Green Party) in 2005, it was announced that global warming is happening much faster than had been anticipated and that the West Antarctic ice sheet might start breaking up far sooner than previously thought. That alone would cause the oceans to rise by sixteen feet (4.88 meters) everywhere¹⁰—a permanent, worldwide, giant tsunami.

Another of the scientific revelations at this 2005 conference in England was that the excessive carbon dioxide is not only going up into the atmosphere, it is also seeping into the oceans and killing off the plankton at the bottom of the marine food chain. As a result, all the fish and other forms of marine life will eventually be affected. No one had previously realized that this would be one of the effects of global warming.

If this is the way the human race will die out, then, unlike the dinosaurs during the fifth extinction, we will have a long and painful death, with millions upon millions of environmental refugees involved in the most terrible struggles for food and water. Billions will die. The scale of human suffering is too horrible to contemplate.

So, what is being done about it? What are our world leaders doing?

World leaders have had great difficulty in agreeing upon protocols that will effectively halt this disaster. And even when there have been agreements, they have not always been honored. The net result is that emissions are increasing instead of decreasing. The International Energy Agency now estimates that with the population explosion in developing countries and the rapid industrialization of huge countries like China and India, by 2040 the emissions will have increased by 62 percent!

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All the nations of the earth need to cooperate on this one. If a number of nations agree to do what is required while others like the United States and populous “emerging” nations like China and India do not, all of us will perish.

As so many commentators have said, “We know what to do, but we lack the will to do it.” Why? Because we do not seem to be able to move beyond our short-sighted selfish interests, our individualism.

Those who have more than enough need to tighten their belts and lower their standard of living. All of us need to give up the idea of unlimited economic growth. But individualism and group selfishness will not allow us to do this. Any politician who proposes anything remotely like this will simply not get the votes of the majority of his or her people. We lack the political will to do what is needed because most people cannot transcend their egos sufficiently to consider the needs of others and especially the needs of future generations. The ego doesn’t want to know. So, the problem is denied and knowledge of it is suppressed. That is self-evidently suicidal for the human race.

It is not a matter of blaming all the selfish people in the world for our troubles. It is not appropriate to engage in accusations, condemnations, witch-hunting, or scapegoating. It is a matter of recognizing that we cannot go forward without tackling the problem of unbridled ego—and this includes a good look at our own egos too.

There are many brave activists who spare nothing to raise consciousness and mobilize people to save the earth and there are a growing number of spiritual teachers who work hard to move people beyond the tyranny of the ego. Joanna Macy is surely right when she says, “Something important is happening in our world that you are not going to read about in the newspapers. I consider it the most fascinating and hopeful development of our time, and it is one of the reasons I am so glad to be alive today. It has to do with what is occurring to the notion of the

self.”¹¹ Psychologists, philosophers, sociologists, spiritual writers and mystics of different religious traditions are looking at the destructive consequences of selfishness, and at practices—new and old—that might enable us to transcend our narcissism. Most of these studies focus on the ego.

The Ego and Beyond

Freud, Jung, and other psychologists use the word “ego” in different ways. But the most common use today among psychologists and spiritual writers, and the use that I will make of it, is in reference to the self-centered self, the “I” that imagines itself to be the center of the world, judging everything in terms of how it affects “me” and only “me.” The ego is the *selfish self*.

This ego is possessive. It often manifests itself as an insatiable desire for money and possessions. Hence our Western obsession with wealth. Our whole economy is based upon the powerful driving force of self-interest. The unbridled ego wants to control its world: people, events, and nature. Hence the obsession with power and authority.

The ego compares itself with others and competes for praise and privilege, for love, for power and money. This is what makes us envious, jealous, and resentful of others. It is also what makes us hypocrites, two-faced, and dishonest.

This self-centered ego trusts no one outside of itself (unless it has projected its self-centeredness onto someone else). It is this lack of trust that makes us so insecure. We become inevitably full of fears, worries, and anxieties. Our ego or selfish individualism makes us lonely and fearful.

The selfish self loves no one but itself, seeking only its own needs, its own gratification. Totally lacking in compassion or empathy, the ego can be extraordinarily cruel towards others.

What drives us as humans to make others suffer is our loveless egos: our pride and selfishness.

The human ego can also take the form of group selfishness and structures of domination. The lust for power is the ego's attempt to control the world, if necessary at the point of a gun. The lust for money is the expression of the ego's insatiable possessiveness. Institutions and other structures are then set up to pursue these aims. Patriarchy is the social structure that embodies the male ego.

But, the ego is not my true self. It is not me. It is a false image of myself. It is the *illusion* that I am a separate, independent, isolated, and autonomous individual. No matter what I imagine myself to be, I am in fact part of an immense universe in which everything is interdependent and intimately interconnected. We are products of evolution, products of our social and cultural upbringing, and products of our psychological conditioning. We do not even begin to become free until we recognize this. When we imagine that as human beings we stand somewhere outside and above the universe looking down upon it, we are not free and independent, we are deluded. It is a case of false consciousness.

All the divisions, conflicts, and rivalries between human beings, and between humans and the rest of nature, arise out of the ego's illusion of separateness and independence.

It seems that in the process of evolution the human species developed the phenomenon we call ego. We developed a self-conscious image of ourselves as separate from the rest of the world. We became self-centered. So, in early infancy, each of us develops something of an ego. The process is called individuation. As we grow up we make use of that ego, but usually in a controlled way in order to accommodate others. The control comes from ourselves or from our culture, religion, or societal laws.

Over the centuries the human ego has been an extraordinarily powerful driving force toward human achievements of all

kinds, especially in the West from the time of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the beginnings of science and the Industrial Revolution. It was out of all this that Western individualism developed.

It has often been said that selfishness is natural, and in a sense that is true. But nature is not static; it is evolutionary. The ego has evolved over many thousands of years. Today it has reached a critical point. It has become destructive, so that it would be perfectly natural for us to take a giant leap forward, to transcend the limitations of the ego, to develop a greater, more universal, and more evolved sense of self—not by fighting against anything in us that is natural but by developing another great longing, the natural desire for unity, community, oneness, and love.