Chapter 5
It, I, and We

The distinction between the "It" and the "I" approaches to truth has been thoroughly explored for many decades,[1] but the concept of "We" needs much more attention. The reality of "We" is something more than can be explored with contemplative inquiry. And the reality of "We" is something more than a complicated object that is understandable through scientific examination. A "We" is at least two "I"s, which makes it more than an object. And because "We" is at least two, it is more than an "I" inquiring into that persons own inner "I."

Intimacy

Let us start by examining an intimate relationship between two persons, two conscious "I"s. Neither of those "I"s can see into the inner being of the other. Each needs the reports from the other and the behaviors of the other to intuit what is taking place within the inner life of the other. The guesses or "intuitions" about the life of the other are based on the inner knowing of one's own inner being. Sensing the inner life of another is based on the resonance that I experience through knowing my own self. Of course, we can be mistaken about another person. Such mistakes are usually rooted in blocks we have to paying close attention to the other person or in mistakes about our own person that we are projecting upon the other. Mistakes can also be based on the primal fact that we never understand any aspect of Reality fully. Nevertheless, we do often intuit (or guess) quite well elements of truth about the lives of others. Sometimes we are closer to knowing the truth about these persons than these person are of knowing their own being. This limited, but real, knowing of one another is the foundation of intimacy.

Much more could be said about the nature of intimacy, but my concern in this chapter is simply to call attention to the fact that an interpersonal relationship between two persons cannot be understood through contemplative inquiry alone. The wisdom derived from contemplative inquiry helps, but is not sufficient. Wisdom about interpersonal relations comes from experiences with interpersonal relationships. And this learning is something different from contemplative inquiry. We are observing our own responses to the other, and we are observing the other's responses to us. There is a scientific element in such observing, but interpersonal learning is also something different from scientific learning. Interpersonal learning requires interior sensibility and well as outward observation. As we reflect deeply on the nature of intimacy we learn that we have a "We" approach to truth going on that needs to be distinguished from both the "It" approach and "I" approach.

Martin Buber helped us with this topic in his discussion of "I-Thou" relations. The "I-it" relation that we have with a hammer is different than the I-Thou relationship we have with another human being. In the latter we are aware or can be aware that there is another "I" looking back. Even though we do not experience the other "I" directly, we are somehow aware that the human other is not a hammer or any other inanimate object. In the I-Thou relationship there is a conscious being who has a perspective on my conscious being. Unlike a hammer another person has another sense of reality

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[1] I am thinking of the work of Martin Buber in *I and Thou* as well as the work of Lewis Mumford in *The Myth of the Machine*. These older writers have been followed by a raft of contemporary psychologists, religious teachers, and philosophers of consciousness. Among those I most treasure for exploring this difference between the "It" and "I" approaches to truth are A. H. Almaas and Ken Wilber.

agreeing or disagreeing with my sense of reality. This constitutes a boundary to my being that a hammer does not provide. And there is a potential inspiration and benefit provided to me that a hammer cannot provide. The interpersonal relation can assist me to know my own being better. A hammer cannot do that. I do not seek out a hammer for counseling.

We somehow know that it is a reduction of what is real to treat our "I-Thou" relations as if they were 'I-it' relations. Very few other persons tolerate being treated as a mere thing in "my" perceptive world. And each of us can sense distaste when we are being treated as a mere object in someone else's world. We can experience something uncanny about looking into another person's eyes for a sustained period. We can realize that there is another "I" looking back. In such an experience we can experience a disquieting contradiction to any belief we may harbor that we are the only consciousness in the cosmos.

While we can understand Sartre's remark that hell is other people, we also know that when we surrender any need we have for being the one and only person, other persons are a blessing to us. When another person challenges my illusions that may be painful, but it is also a blessing in terms of enabling my more truthful living. Two perspectives on Reality can be experienced as better than one. Like seeing with two eyes, two people can often see more clearly than one.

Also, encountering another "I" is often needed to inspire me to contemplate further the enigma of being the "I" that I am. While I must view my own "I" with my own solitary eyes of consciousness, the behaviors and reports of another "I" can call my own inner reality to my attention and can correct some of my misunderstandings about myself and others. Indeed, intimacy with others is not something established by me. When I awoke to being an "I," other "I"s were already there offering intimacy to me.

Intimacy is an enormous topic that it would require a whole library of books to fully describe. My purpose here is call attention to how exploring the nature of intimacy between two "I"s requires something more than exploring the "I" we explore in the contemplative approach to truth. It is also something more than what we explore in the "It" approach of scientific research. Furthermore, this approach to "We" realities is not simply a combination of the "I" and "It" approaches. We are viewing a third approach to the wholeness of Reality: the "We" approach to truth.

Commonality

In addition to intimacy, commonality is another aspect of the "We" approach to truth. Every relationship between two people or among many people includes something we can call "commonality." The language we use to speak to one another is an example of commonality. We also have common modes of association, common customs and moralities, common styles of living, common methods of doing things, common educational systems, commonly inherited wisdom, as well as common religious symbols and practices. We also have common political and economic systems in which we live. We may be critical of much of this commonality, but we would not be human without some sort of commonality. It is seldom true that anyone would want to discard all inherited commonality. Most of the time we simply want to repair part of the commonality in which we live. The forces of a change movement will use much of the inherited commonality to make their desired changes. In a word, we conduct all our intimate relationships and all of our participation in social change within some aggregate of common social designs.

Our interpersonal relations take place not only within a cultural commonality but also within a common political environment and a common economic environment.

The "We" approach to truth includes attention to cultural, political, and economic commonality. Such attention is aided by both scientific research and contemplative inquiry, but neither of these approaches to truth are enough to fully understand the experience of social commonality. For this we need the "We" approach to truth.

The Consensus Process

So how does commonality arise and change? Commonalty comes into being through the consensus of a group of human beings. We are born into but also choose to function within a given social commonality. Many artists, inventors, organizers, teachers, writers, activists, leaders contribute to the advent and development of this commonality. Intentionally or willy-nilly, each group of people choose to operate within inventions of commonality. It may be that our particular commonality was chosen by a small powerful group who more or less forced it upon the rest of us. Perhaps persuasion was used rather than violence or the threat of violence. Perhaps we were just born into this commonality and were compassionately indoctrinated into it by parents who were mostly concerned to prepare us for living in the real social world that we have on our hands. No matter how our participation in a given social commonality came about, we joined it – to some extent willingly. We may also be rebellious or critical of elements of this commonalty. We may be dedicated to improving it or changing it or perhaps leaving it and finding another, better commonality. However that may be, what we need to understand is that every commonality came into being and comes into being through the establishment on an operating consensus among those participating in it.

So what is consensus? Properly understood, consensus does not mean everyone in a group agreeing on something. Nor is consensus some ideal like-mindedness that never entirely exists among any set of unique human beings. Consensus simply indicates a willingness of a group of humans to go along with some common mode of living together. Disagreements can still exist about what this means, or how important this is, or when and how it needs to be changed.

Consensus can also mean the willingness of a group of humans to join together in a movement for changing the common mode of living with which they started. Humans who devote themselves to a project of economic, political, or cultural change must consense upon some sort of vision, strategy, and group commonality in order to carry out their change project. Perhaps it is being a troupe of actors putting on a play. Perhaps it is being group of protesters shutting down a coal-fired power plant. Perhaps it is a group of disciples following a particular teacher. Perhaps it is a group of devotees practicing together some religious ritual or discipline. In whatever human beings willingly do together, the dynamic of consensus is operating.

Again, it must be clarified that a group can embrace consensus in spite of having serious disagreements. Those disagreements are simply part of the consensus within which that group consents to continue functioning. As an extreme example, the peasants of a dictatorship may have serious disagreements with the policies of their King but, nevertheless, consense to be part of this kingdom rather than some other kingdom or trying to build a society on their own. Two political parties may disagree vigorously about many things, but nevertheless consense to operate within the same political system. Among practitioners of a religious organization there may be disagreements that are simply part of the ongoing consensus to be members of that religious organization. Even the smallest groups of consensus builders have disagreements. Sometimes people do what the Quakers called "stand aside" from supporting certain directions of consensus taken by the group. Standing aside means

that one disagrees with the direction chosen, but nevertheless consents to remain part of the group and thus go along with the undesired direction. If a group values the active participation of everyone, they will take dissenting persons seriously and make every effort to include their dissenting insights as much as possible. If a person truly believes that the entire worth of the group is destroyed by a proposed consensus, making that known means stating the possibility of leaving or splitting the group into opposing factions.

I will not discuss the details of good methods for facilitating consensus building discussions. I am only trying to define "consensus" is a general way in order to point to something universal within the conduct of building, being, and rebuilding social commonality.

When consensus does not exist to any degree whatsoever, a group typically breaks up into two or more opposing groups. That may be two or more religions, two or more political parties, two or more nations, even two or more warring factions. Where there are two or more classes within one society, the most powerful class may be enslaving the other classes (or races or cultures or genders). Here a very weak consensus may exist across these severe boundaries, and the society is vulnerable to revolution or fragmentation. If conflicts among opposing aspects of a group or society are to be overcome, a new truth must be found that all the factions can more full consense to live within. The strength of a society ultimately depends upon the fullness of the consensus with which it is operating. The search for such a practical, workable truth by which to socially exist is the process I am calling the consensus approach to truth. Along with the intimacy approach to truth, the consensus approach to truth is part of the "We" approach to truth.

Workability Verification

The consensus approach to truth is verified in part by the factual empiricism of scientific research. It is also verified in part by contemplative wisdom from the "I" approach to truth. But additional verification is needed to complete the consensus building of the "We" approach to truth. "Workability" is a word for that something more. We are employing the "We" approach to truth whenever we are asking this core question: "What actually works as a truth for directing this social group at this time in history in directions that this group must, needs, or wants to go to meet its challenges?" Such truth is not a rigid ideology nor a directive from some supposedly divine source. It is the result of hard work by intensely thoughtful persons respecting one another and struggling with one another for a truth to live by that deals with an appropriate social response to existing natural and social challenges. The employment of some sort of consensus process to find a workable truth for a common social life together is a truth quest that is intrinsic to the social life of humanity. It is a third approach to truth. Both the reality of intimacy and reality of commonality in human life make possible and necessary this "We" approach to truth.