T.C.

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THE SELF: OUR MODERN PEROCCUPATION

Life is not about living anymore; at least not for the vast majority of people. More than anything, life today is not about about living simply because it does not have to be. One need not travel back to the time of hunter-gatherers and the like to find a world where daily life was principally concerned with survival. Just two hundred years ago, though a multitude of fundamental technological changes had been made, much of the world lived an agriculture and trade-based lifestyle where everyday was devoted to preserving one’s own life and those of his or her family. This is not to say that people today do not work for the sake of preserving their and their family members’ lives. However there is a fundamental difference between the farm lifestyle of two or three centuries ago compared to the lives people live today, even if they are perhaps involved in farming. The fundamental difference has to do with the focus, the expectations, and perceptions of life as well as oneself in it. In earlier life, work was more directly, more fundamentally linked to survival.

Today, though perhaps the ultimate goal of work is the same, the direct focus is more on the intermediary world of money, which renders seemingly abstract work into something meaningful. Also whereas a few centuries ago when one’s home was one’s workplace, and the weather and surrounding community were integral to survival, everyday life for most laborers in the 21st century is not as wholly and inescapably linked to work. Work is a world unto its own today; one that most people try their best to separate themselves from as soon as the specified end of their ‘work day’ comes. At the same time, community, among family and neighbors, is no longer perceived as fundamental to one’s survival either. Though people today are in fact more dependent than ever before on people outside themselves, the dependency is not as apparent as it once. Whereas once children were needed to share the labor, and symbiotic relationships with one’s community had to be established, the dependency of today is hidden in supermarkets and other facets of the economy. For all these reasons it can be said that survival, though it cannot be ignored, is in fact no longer people’s principal preoccupation. With more time on their hands, less of a sense of community, and a world in which running water, food, and the amazing number of house-hold items that make life possible and comfortable are regarded as immediately and eternally available, people have become hyper attentive and aware to something they simply could not before: the self.

This does not mean that only until recently did people become aware of themselves, but that a conception of one’s self was not nearly as important to the shape of a person’s life as it is today. First off, people’s preoccupation with the self is not an inherently bad thing. Hyper self-awareness can manifest itself in a number of ways, most principally in the form of self-consciousness (seeing one’s self in relation to others), which in turn can manifest into self-absorption as well as self-hate. Not everyone is either completely self-loving or self-hating, but everyone possesses a certain obsession with their own self-image as they themselves see it and as they wish others to see it. However, before delving into the many forms and exhibitions of today’s preoccupation with the self, let us first look at some more motivations, or rather reinforcements of this preoccupation.

The world today is full of mirrors; physical as well as less literal ones. Let us first discuss the actual physical mirrors that can be found above a sink or in a hall. Mirrors are everywhere. Every time a person goes to the bathroom they are confronted with the image of their own face. Most households will have a mirror hanging in a hallway or in a bedroom. In the city, (where most people live today) even the outdoors does not offer much of an escape from one’s reflection considering the glass panes that line nearly every street. This seems like a rather normal thing to us all today but it is a truly unnatural and relatively recent fact of life that people should be so constantly in the presence of their own image. In the past, though people certainly encountered reflective surfaces and were conscious of their own physical image, they knew nothing like the incessant shadow any New Yorker who frequents a sidewalk has come to know so well. These mirrors most obviously foster self-awareness in the form of self-consciousness since they offer an outsider’s vantage point to look at one’s own body. In this way, mirrors are often linked to self-love or hate, offering one’s own countenance to gawk over in vanity or disgust. However even for the people who are not particularly concerned either way with their physical appearance, mirrors heighten self-awareness just in that they provide a constant peripheral awareness of one’s own body. People are infinitely more familiar with their own appearance than they would be if mirrors did not surround them as they do. This hyper-familiarity with the physical self aids a more fundamental conception of the self than just self-consciousness. People begin to see themselves like a character in a story. They are the film star of their lives. In this way it can be said that people are obsessed with themselves.

The idea that people perceive themselves like the star of a film is particularly apt in an age heavily entrenched in media. Most people watch at least one movie a week along with some other television programming. They also consume an amazing amount of music. Thanks to the invention of ipods and other mp3 players, listening music is no longer limited to the indoors. Go on the train or even walk down a street in New York and you’ll find that a large number of people around you are have their ear buds in. What is the relevance of all this to people’s preoccupation with the self though? It is relevant because film, television, and music all offer what can be called a sort of dramatization of living. They take life, this amazingly abstract mysterious sate of being, and turn the camera on it or write it in to song with people at the centerpiece of it. It was mentioned earlier that we live in an age where running water, food, and the other necessities (luxuries too) are regarded as natural. There is no thought to the fact that clean, potable water comes from the faucet whenever you turn it on. Of course it does. If it did not something would be wrong. A person would say “hey! My faucet is broken. This is ridiculous” In these brief moments of absence it becomes clear how utterly dependent people in the developed world are on the hidden, impersonal world of industry and institutions that have supplanted the more immediate more personal community of the past. However, for the most part, the faucet does run, and when you go to the supermarket the cereal you were looking for will be there. In this way, where all things related to survival and subsistence are reduced to a negligible task, even luxury of its own, life itself appears more like a game, a movie or a song, than something that you must fight to be a part of. Films do not show whole lives in that they don’t show the character in all the in between moments, doing what they must to survive. . . But neither do most people’s own lives either. Combined with the constant presence of media with characters and voices at the center of it, this detachment from the reality of what it means to stay alive shifts the focus away from life and more onto identity. Because life is like a movie, people of course try to play the characters in them. We see identities on screen, in the lyrics of a song, or in the script of our own cinematic lives and we attempt to emulate them. The fact that so many people walking through the streets of New York or riding the subway do so listening to music can be seen as evidence of the amazing affinity people have to music, but it can also be seen as the inability people have to simply exist even in the constructed reality of city life. People like walking down the street, matching their footsteps to the beat of their song in between glances at one’s reflection in store windows, because it makes them feel like they are in a film or a music video. Sure, the whole world is happening, but you, you are at the center of it. Now what will you be?

We live in a time when people can customize their selves in more ways than ever before. Whereas before you were born a farmer’s or carpenter’s child and so a farmer or carpenter you would be; today, you can “be” anything you want. That is not entirely true for everyone in all places in the world, however it is undeniably true that our society today (especially in America) is constructed to offer the regular person a sense that if they put in enough time in the education system, they can end up in the occupation of their choosing. I said before that the world of work has become less integral to life, being separated from the rest of life and sanctioned off as a world of its own. This is true, but at the same time, one’s job, or “what they do” has come to be seen as synonymous with what they are. “What do you want to be when you grow up?” It’s a question certainly every young American person has heard at some point. It is quite a strange question and one that inadvertently asserts that your occupation (what you do) is who you are.

It is not just in the job sector however that society is positioned for people to pick and choose, shape and mold their identity. Think of clothing. Whereas once there was not much in the way of fashion, and everyone wore more or less the same simplistic attire, the world today offers the consumer an unfathomable amount of choice in the way of apparel. Clothing has become diversified to the extent that what a person wears has come to be recognized as a statement. What you wear says something about who you are, and the similarities in someone’s attire and someone else’s is supposed to show some sort of alliance between them. If you wear tight skinny jeans and this sort of sweater than well you’ll probably be compatible with this other person who wears skinny jeans and similar sweater. Chances are however you want get along too well with that guy over there. You might have noticed but his jeans are quite baggy, and his sweater, well its more of a hoody than a sweater.

Beyond this superficial preoccupation with the self, people have become much more obsessed with the psychic self as well. How many people in America have a psychiatrist or some form of mental therapist? Just as people love to analyze the characters they see on their T.V. screen, people cannot help but analyze actual humans; and the person they analyze the most is their self. People surely have always had opinions about themselves. However the rising incident of identity crises and the fact that so many people actually pay someone to help them sort out who they are, speaks to just how much people have become obsessed with their thoughts and their own mental identity. It is not uncommon for a person to question their self worth or to question the point of their own existence. Of course they do. A difficult contradiction rises out of a life where one’s eyes are so constantly trained to his/her own self, while at the same time, a consciousness of the vast number or other people and activity existing outside the self cannot be ignored. Most of the time the self wins out. We are able to neglect the rest of the world for the sake of our selves. However occasionally, the rest of existence dominates, and in times like these it is most common that the fundamental contradiction of a self-obsessed perception becomes jarringly, uncomfortably apparent. It is amazingly rare to find someone who is simultaneously aware of the vastness and multiplicity of existence while at the same time at peace and acknowledging of their own preoccupation with him/herself