

Spiritual Direction with Dag Hammarskjöld

Spiritual Director (SD): Welcome, please come in and have a seat.

Dag Hammarskjöld (DH): Thank you for agreeing to see me. I come for a strange reason. I don't know if I should be here at all.

SD: Sometimes the mystery of an impulse to seek spiritual direction is itself more than sufficient reason to come. I am glad you are here.

DH: Thank you for that comfort. Well, let me get right to it. I have had a long and deeply committed life. I have tried to work each day to advance human values, you might say spiritual values, in the ordinary and practical ways in which nation states interact.

SD: Yes, your career gave integrity to the United Nations and built it into a potent instrument for good in the world.

DH: I think and hope that is true. But I come because of a dream which seems to foretell that all that I worked for is deeply imperiled.

SD: Much of the early history of our faith traditions involved the dreams of prophets and leaders of tribal groups. Dreams are often the bridges between where human history seems stuck and where it might or might not go.

DH: In this case, what seems to be imperiled is where nation states and the international community will be in the 2020s. What I would like to do is tell you not so much about the characters in the dreams, but the ideas that underlying the way people were interacting with each other, how countries were treating each other, and the nature of the world revealed in the dream.

SD: Yes, please, jump right in.

DH: I have distilled the gist of the dream into four different ideas that seem to have become the driving forces of how humans and their nations are interacting in the early twenty-first century. These are: 1) forces/ideas, both intentional and coincidental, which teach humans learned helplessness; 2) how humans incorporate this into their view and life in the world and express their learned helplessness; 3) forces, both intentional and coincidental, which teach humans to feel entitled; and 4) how humans incorporate into their lives and express their learned entitlement.

The two powerful forces of learned helplessness and learned entitlement are interacting synergistically together and magnifying each other. What the dream revealed is that

helplessness and entitlement erode spiritual and moral values and make money and power false idols that are worshipped universally.

SD: That is a lot to take in. You will need to lead me through each part of the ideas you have deduced from your dream.

DH: Yes, of course. In this postmodern era, people unconsciously learn that they are helpless over the larger systems that seem to control their lives. Large corporate interests decide what kind of products are offered and where they are made. Large financial interests control how the economy works. Large political entities control the nature of a very distressed healthcare system. In other words, most people don't feel that they have agency about major events and forces that affect the quality of their lives. A community or city can be prosperous and upbeat one day and then have years of depression simply because a large corporation decides to move a facility to another location. A family can be doing fine one day and then be tilting at the windmills of financial depression for decades because one family member has an intractable illness.

SD: I see what you are saying. People unconsciously learn that they have no real control over big factors that control major aspects of their lives. They learn helplessness.

DH: The only alternative available in the face of this massive education in learned helplessness is a lesson offered to a favored few. Favored by race, by position, by education, by beauty, by exceptional talent or some intrinsic head start, a few respond to the unconscious realization of helplessness by incorporating a value in their lives that if they can make enough money they will be able to experience some sense of agency. The drive to have power through money, to have some agency over major currents in their lives creates in the favored few a strong drive that impels the favored view to be willing to put at risk the rule of law, an impartial judiciary, democratic principles of the right of all to vote—in effect to sacrifice the underpinnings of a civil society— to secure their own gain.

SD: In pre-modern times the need to be connected to others was necessary for survival. What you are saying is that in a postmodern era the instinctive need for a person to feel he has some control over his life undermines the millennia old instinct to build community, since it was through creation of a stable community that all gained greater economic security.

What happens to the vast majority who learn this anti-community lesson of helplessness?

DH: The lesson of helplessness is often learned slowly. For example in Appalachia, or racially redlined African American communities, or ghettos of the marginalized in any big cities, or in families with long histories of alcoholism helplessness is learned over generations.

SD: What is the response to learning that you are helpless?

DH: Good question. The answer is surprising. It revolves around this other world wind force that teaches entitlement.

SD: How does that work?

DH: In this postmodern era everyone in the culture learns a version of entitlement and major corporations make billions by reinforcing the idea in a very subtle way that you are entitled. For example, Amazon becomes an e-commerce giant by teaching everyone that they are entitled to order anything they want from their computer and receive it on their doorstep the very next day.

SD: Kings and princes of old never had that kind of service.

DH: Quite right. Nearly everyone also learns that they are entitled to have any kind of entertainment streamed to them at any time of day or night, whatever their whim.

SD: So people are learning that they are helpless and they are entitled at the same time.

DH: Correct. And in a strange way those who feel most powerless compensate by feeling more entitled.

SD: What is the result of this double whammy of helplessness and entitlement?

DH: These forces combine, especially in the years after the first black American is elected President, to generate a rise in racism, sexism, super-nationalism and homophobia.

For all of us our race, our sex, our national identity and our gender orientation are essential ways to understand who we are in the world. To over-identifying with any of these fundamental characteristics and disparage those with differences in these essential characteristics allows one's sense of learned entitlement to be bolstered.

SD: I believe I see what you are saying.

DH: A person feels a little less at the mercy of their helplessness if he has this illusion of feeling more entitled by difference in any of these essential aspects of human identity. Now the problem with all this is that collectively it puts at peril all of the trans-national and international structures I worked so hard to create through my time at the UN. It allows demagogues and those with power and economic clout, and for the most part those are the same, to manipulate open democratic systems and sway voters to their advantage simply by playing to the underlying prejudice that supports the illusion of entitlement. It puts at risk the European Union which has achieved the miracle of keeping the peace in Europe for nearly seventy-five years.

SD: I guess you could also say it puts at risk the vision the United States gave to so many countries in the twentieth century that a functioning liberal democracy was the best way to give individuals agency and value, or to use the terms of its charter, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

DH: You are right. The United States in the early twentieth-first century no longer has a vital functioning democratic system. It has a very weak democracy that is largely manipulated through power and money. Seeing into the future, I believe Jimmy Carter was the last truly spiritual President of that country. He ran and was elected President without becoming a slave to large moneyed interest because then elections were publicly financed. And back then the Voting Rights Act had not been repealed and leaders of all political parties, at least in principle, encouraged everyone to vote. That era of putting the basic principles of democratic government first before partisan power is long gone.

SD: Your dream of the future for the United States and the world is bleak. Did you see any prophetic hope in the dream? Is there an antidote to the popular experience of learned helplessness and the illusion of entitlement that allows everyone to be manipulated by power and money?

DH: I didn't see any reason to hope revealed in my dream. Ever since the dream I have been pondering — what antidote might there be. This is where I am hoping you might help me see with a clearer vision, so that in my writing I can offer guidance to those caught in these dark clouds of the future.

SD: I take it that for you to come here, your gut instinct is that in some way the answer lies in something spiritual.

DH: Yes, that is true. My feelings of hope are faint. But what hope there is I see must lie in the realm of what is spiritual. I say that being cognizant of the dangers of mistaking a religious solution for a spiritual one. For centuries religious traditions have been and still are used as one of the chief ways to create a sense of learned entitlement and to rationalize the use of violence against others of different races and faiths. Whether terror is used by members of the KKK or Islamic extremist, its appeal arises from the same basic propositions that harmful behavior among humans is fueled by learned helplessness and the learned illusion of entitlement.

SD: Certainly your own personal spiritual journey enlivened and sustained the work that you did for humanity through the United Nations.

DH: That is true. So it seems to me that only from some greater spiritual awakening will people see the folly of their learned helplessness and learned illusion of entitlement. Only then can humanity make progress. That is why I am here. My dream suggests to me that I will die an untimely death and that if I am to leave any wisdom for future generations it will come from the thoughts that are collected in my diaries.

SD: Let's start with looking at the antidotes to learned helplessness. As you described it there is much control over everyone's life by money and power and the experience of helplessness is, unlike learned entitlement, based on reality.

DH: Yes that is, of course, right. My thought is that a greater understanding of spiritual freedom might confront our apparent lack of agency, and the appeal of the learned illusion of entitlement would dissipate and we might find ourselves back on track to creating a more humane and just world. After all some of the greatest discourses on spiritual freedom were written by those who in that moment had no outward freedom. I am think of people like Dr. Martin Luther King's writing *Letters from Birmingham Jail*.

SD: So you are suggesting that if humanity grows so that it no longer over-values money and power then a greater sense of agency would return to ordinary people.

DH: Yes, most people in the 2020s are only controlled and helpless in the realm of materialistic comfort and elitism. If you don't buy into these values there is no control. If the majority of the United States rejected rampant materialism, the consumer society would cease to have such a stranglehold on people. If culture were more about art or music or poetry then people would look to express themselves in these fields to find a sense of agency, not to greed and power.

We all need material sustenance. If we are powerless to assure our basic material needs then those needs become urgent. However, if even after our basic needs are met, all our values revolve around frantically having to get more and more stuff, then we become pawns for any tyrannical power that wishes to manipulate us by our materialistic cravings. Materialism makes powerlessness the cudgel of autocratic power.

SD: To explore your illustration further, if a culture puts a greater value on helping others than on money, on doing something as old fashioned as doing good to others, then agency would come not from money, but from many individual neighborly acts of love and justice.

DH: To be very concrete, if it were more important to sit around a table in the evening and share food and stories than streaming entertainment services, then the need for these services would not have power. If it were more essential to help get something for someone in need, then having a company like Amazon deliver immediately would not be so important.

SD: So what you are saying is that we have created a culture where we truly are powerless in many ways because the things that are most important to us are materialistic and egotistic. Our powerlessness reinforces our materialism and our materialism engenders helplessness. We have traded our better values for a bowl of porridge. If we had not lost our more humane, community values then we would not be so lacking in agency in our lives.

DH: Sadly, I believe that is what my dreams told me. In my lifetime the various religious traditions served as a counter-weight to over-the-top materialism. However, by 2016 it seems people have thrown out the baby with the bath water. Understandably, there was a lot of dirty bath water that needed throwing out, but into the vacuum came a surging sense of ego self-centeredness that religious faith at its best helped negate.

SD: If we had values of love and acceptance of all guiding our culture, rather than self-centered materialism and power, then people would feel they had more agency in their lives, and also there would not be people craving an illusion of entitlement by their differences.

DH: This is the full import of my worry about the future. And so what do I say, even if it is just to myself in my diaries, about how humans can grow to more loving values? What can I say that allows people to have agency and a sense of goodwill toward others who are different in some essential human aspect?

SD: Spiritual growth and insight always occur in the details of life, because that is where we discover spirit is embedded in the coming together of matter and spirit. Abstract admonitions, like love everyone, don't achieve much. If we are to understand what insight you might leave for the future we need to dig into the nitty gritty of the problems your dreams have revealed.

DH: Good point. Learned entitlement is learned in different ways by the underprivileged and the privileged. For the underprivileged, say the abusive, alcoholic former coal miner in Appalachia, his sense of privilege is tied to his race or his family's connection for generations with a small back-hollow of land. He absorbs a sense of deprivation as he is bombarded through media with pictures of how everyone else out there has material means he doesn't have. He feels personally aggrieved at the expense of unknown others who seem different and this feeling usually gets channelled into anger, which often is directed at his own family members and then outside at others who seem different.

The same sense of learned entitlement is seen in underprivileged ghetto communities where, like the poor and out of work coal miner, people because of institutionalized racism suffer a raw lack of opportunity. Such jobs as might be available are often mind-numbing and dispiriting forms of service employment. The abundance of the consumer society always seems beyond reach, and except for those pockets of black culture where the black church has been strong and taught love in the face of racial injustice, there is often a sense of being ostracized and alienated, which breeds a sense of entitlement, and sometimes nihilism. All this flows from living in a land of little opportunity among great abundance.

SD: What happens to those who are privileged?

DH: The highest ideal of twentieth-first century American culture is secular meritocracy. You are either a doctor, lawyer, successful start up entrepreneur or you are a failure. Those who come from positions of privilege have a head start that often allows

them to be a secular, meritocracy winner. They get a head start, but to win this race they have to work long hours, they have to neglect their families, they have to neglect the natural rhythm of work, rest and restoration that a spiritual life demands.

So in the end, having sacrificed all other values to win the meritocracy race, they feel they are owed something. It doesn't matter whether their political outlook is conservative or liberal, if they have achieved success in their field at the expense of human values that we might also call spiritual values, their lives feel like something is missing, and it is. And this illusive sense of something missing motivates their ego's feeling that they deserve something extra, a first class plane ticket, a pass on having a morally guided life, since ordinary morals don't apply to you when you are entitled. The rule of law, the underpinning of a civil society doesn't apply to you if you are entitled. Well, you get the picture, right?

SD: I think so. The picture you are painting is very individualistic, where an individual's need to succeed is paramount and all traditional human and social values take a back seat. The picture you describe reminds me of young medical students who go into medicine with very liberal values about their desire to help heal and care for the sick. After years of residency, where they spend days and nights back-to-back working, they come out feeling not excited about serving the sick and infirm, but that they deserve special treatment because of what they have endured. That special treatment might be a yacht in the Bahamas or a big house with a large front lawn—a modern day castle on the hill, where they live cut off from themselves and the rest of the world.

DH: You paint the picture just as bleak as I imagine it.

SD: Of course, this will not be true of all the doctors or all lawyers or successful entrepreneurs, but a meritocracy culture does create a sense of entitlement for successful meritocrats. You would hope that those meritocrats at the top of the pile would feel this immense sense of gratitude for having the privilege and opportunity to be successful. But gratitude only arises when one feels spiritually connected to something larger, a divine Spirit, the ground of being, or what is traditionally called God. If it is all just about you then the result of a meritocratic culture is a culture of self-centered egotistic entitlement.

DH: That is the picture, I saw in my vision. Now what wisdom can I leave that will help in this dark future?

SD: What may be disheartening to you, Dag, in the face of such overwhelming individualistic and egoic culture breakdown after 2016 is that spiritual solutions are always by their nature slow and gentle. It is only the ego that tries to immediately wrestle something to the ground, declare victory and celebrate. In the spiritual life we are about slowly and gently, over and over again, letting go. Our lives are about being more than doing, more about us than me. That said there are practices that help us learn we are not our ego self. Almost every tradition has practices of contemplation or meditation that over time provide a loosening of the automatic reactivity of the ego self.

Similarly most traditions have practices that help develop one's witnessing consciousness, where we can observe our attachments and aversions and how these keep us out of the moment to moment experience of the only place joy is found, the present.

Finally most traditions also have gratitude practices. These are elemental to a spiritual life. By being grateful we automatically put ourselves in relationship to others, to something outside our self that helped us receive what we are grateful for—and this begins to erode the ego self's need for power and control. You don't need external power and control if your life is graced with gifts from outside the self, which, of course, all our lives are.

DH: Looks like there are only a few arrows in your spiritual quiver.

SD: Yes, but they are true arrows and I am sure that in your writings, in your diary, they will find their mark.

DH: I do not know what my dream portends, but our conversation has given me the courage to try again to capture my thoughts in my diary. Here is something I wrote years ago, which I guess is the reason I have come to you now.

I don't know Who — or what — put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone — or Something — and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.

Postscript

After his tragic death at the age of 47, when his plane crashed on the way to peace negotiations in the Congo, materials in his diary were collected and published two years later in a book entitled *Markings*. Following are quotes from *Markings*, as is the quoted remark above that concludes Dag's dialogue with his spiritual director.

When you have reached the point where you no longer expect a response, you will at last be able to give in such a way that the other is able to receive, and be grateful. When Love has matured and, through a dissolution of the self into light, become a radiance, then shall the Lover be liberated from dependence upon the Beloved, and the Beloved also be made perfect by being liberated from the Lover.

You wake from dreams of doom and--for a moment--you know: beyond all the noise and the gestures, the only real thing, love's calm unwavering flame in the half-light of an early dawn.

Never, for the sake of peace and quiet, deny your own experience or convictions.

In the point of rest at the center of our being, we encounter a world where all things are at rest in the same way. Then a tree becomes a mystery, a cloud a revelation, each man a cosmos of whose riches we can only catch glimpses. The life of simplicity is simple, but it opens to us a book in which we never get beyond the first syllable.

The longest journey is the journey inward.

This accidental meeting of possibilities calls itself I.

I ask: what am I doing here? And, at once, this I becomes unreal.

God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder the source of which is beyond all reason.

It is not we who seek the Way, but the Way which seeks us. That is why you are faithful to it, even while you stand waiting, so long as you are prepared, and act the moment you are confronted by its demands.