

I'd like to share with you today some thoughts on perspective. Not my original thinking by any means, but those of several thinkers from varying backgrounds – Jean Gebser, Paul Halpern, David Bohm, William Blake, and Scott Preston – among many others. Scott in particular has done a marvelous job of bringing all these threads together.

What does it mean to have a perspective? How did that come about?

To have a perspective is to have a “point of view”. This idea arrives in Western thinking with the Renaissance, and is best illustrated by Dürer’s Grid. Albrecht Dürer was a German painter and printmaker who devised a way to train the eye to perceive perspective. It consisted of a wooden frame strung with cord or wire from side-to-side and top-to-bottom in such a way as to form a grid of regular squares that one could look through. A short post with a hole in the top was placed a short distance away, and the artist looked through the hole and through the grid at what they were sketching. This was the point of view. What they saw in each grid was transferred to paper, and the illusion of 3 dimensions on a flat plane was created in a formal, precise manner.

Illustrations from that era show four lines emerging from the eye to form the corners of a square on whatever it was looking at – the ground, a building, a tree – an imaginal flat plane that exists only in the brain. This plane becomes the base of a pyramid whose apex is the eye.

*As Scott Preston observes: This becomes a metaphor for logic and thinking in general — the rational and logic ordering and arranging of space as a ratio of spaces and as a system of objects. Beginning in the Renaissance, the onus and emphasis shifted to the eye as the principal sense and organ of knowing and intellectual mastery.*

This consciousness structure – the perspectival consciousness structure –has informed and shaped much of our relationship with world since then. When we “keep something in perspective,” it means to see and think of it a particular way.

The imaginal space of the Renaissance artists becomes the objective reality of science and rationality. The use of perspective actually changes Western consciousness. It literally created

three-dimensional space and gave rise to the Cartesian-Newtonian worldview, and ultimately the Enlightenment, which is symbolized quite nicely by the eye-crowned pyramid on the back of the US dollar bill and the motto “New Order of the Ages”.

As Jean Gebser notes: *The structure is the proportionality, and the proportionality is directly connected to the number of “dimensions” that a consciousness structure perceives and recognizes.*

*A three-dimensional ratio gives you a different consciousness structure than a two-dimensional or a four-dimensional ratio — a monad, a dyad, a triad, or a tetrad gives you different a different sense of the “ratio” which constitutes the characteristic “rationality” of the mode of perception and consciousness structure.*

It’s a pretty radical shift to this new 3D rationality. The Catholic church resisted it. Islamic clerics rejected perspectivism outright as sorcerous and idolatrous and as usurping the authority of Allah. And rightly so, from their ecclesiastical understanding. The eye and the new rationality come to dominate, and the world becomes fixed in place, caught in the grid and the cube. It is now a material world, filled with objects that are subject to cause and effect, but not the suffused with the radiant Divine.

Which is not to say that this shift in consciousness wasn’t a marvelous thing. It was immensely liberating and transformative at the time. Long story short, it’s the beginning of our modern world.

In his book *The Ever-Present Origin*, Jean Gebser explores the evolution of perspective consciousness and perception, which he also calls “the mental-rational consciousness structure”. He concludes that the perspectival mode of consciousness has now decayed or degenerated from its initial sense of freedom, fluidity and expansiveness into something mechanical and devoid of life, and as something now contracting and stuck in an ever-narrowing and reified “point-of-view”.

Why is this?

Scott Preston says: *Time, is the short answer. This particular method of perspectivising consciousness is not adequate for handling the phenomena of time. Descartes himself pointedly omitted time from his method, basically leaving the realm of time and the care of souls to the ecclesiastics and the Church, while his method, the objective method, would focus on the possession and mastery of space and Nature.*

Time is the dimension missing from the perspectival consciousness structure. It tries to deal with time as if it were space, and not only fails, it falls into error. Perspectival logic is three dimensional, not four. Time treated this way becomes linear and ever more finely divided. It is clockwork time, not time that flows unbroken like a river, or in multiple ways.

Einstein unified space and time. And our culture and consciousness are still trying to integrate this, in a world built on the mastery of space and Nature. A world that is more and more automated, more and more constrained, and yet more fragmented and divided. A world into which something new is emerging from necessity.

Let's return one last time to Jean Gebser and Scott Preston:

*A four-dimensional reality requires a different ratio, and a different sense of proportion and balance, than a three-dimensional one or a two-dimensional one. For Gebser, then, the sense of "ratio" of any particular consciousness structure and mode of perception is intimately connected to the number of dimensions a consciousness structure perceives and acknowledges as "real". The archaic is zero-dimensional. The magical is one-dimensional. The mythical is two-dimensional. These are the modes of perception that Gebser calls either "unperspectival" or "pre-perspectival". The mental-rational recognizes three-dimensions of the ratio and is called therefore "perspectival", and it takes the form of a pyramid or triangle. The new consciousness and mode of perception, with its new "ratio", is a four-dimensional structure, thus "a-perspectival", and takes the form of a mandala.*

*The mandala structure, and mandala logic, is the most appropriate form for representing the new "ratio" as well as what Gebser calls the "a-ratio" because it is the most appropriate form*

*for rendering visible the meaning of the unity within diversity. Therefore, you see today many emerging new forms of logic that are grounded in the tetrad rather than the triad or dualism. This new quadrilateral logic, which is appearing everywhere, is the mind's reaching towards a new ratio made necessary by the spacetime integration, and this reaching towards a new ratio is Blake's "fourfold vision", that he wrote of in a letter to a friend:*

Now I a fourfold vision see,  
And a fourfold vision is given to me:  
'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight  
And threefold in soft Beulah's night  
And twofold always, may God us keep  
From single vision and Newton's sleep!

*Any change in the "ratio" thus brings about a complete transformation of the Gestalt of reality. An example is the tendency now to perceive objects as "events" rather than as static "things". Even space itself, under the impress of time, now flows and is considered an "event". Space flows, bends, curves, expands or contracts or evolves. It has become mutable under the impress of time, and as such, the Buddhist "law of impermanence" becomes very real and concrete to our inner understanding.*

Well, maybe. These emergences are happening all around us, and yet, we are caught between the waning dominance of perspectival consciousness and the new four-fold visions. (Which integrate the perspectival, as the perspectival integrated dualism.)

There's more, and I'll continue on next month. But I'm going to stop here for now, because I want to address the implications of the decay of perspectival consciousness for Unitarian Universalism.

Unitarianism has prided itself – and rightfully so, I think – on being grounded in the Enlightenment and the mental-rational. It freed us from religions and states based on creeds, belief, and Divine authority. It led us, via the use of reason, to humanism and liberalism.

Liberalism in the classic sense as a method for resolving conflict, gaining knowledge, and advancing toward truth. But as we've seen, it arose from a perspectival consciousness that has limitations. Universalism comes in much later, and is more concerned with eternity and the care of souls, something that Descartes split out from the mental-rational model centuries ago. It is an uneasy marriage, as many have pointed out.

We are beginning to understand the necessity of integrating multiple points-of-view, but we don't yet have a model to do that, a mandala and a mandala logic. I'm not sure we even agree on the need for it, as we still seem to be struggling over whose POV will rule the roost, whose POV will be the eye (eye-identity?) at the top of the pyramid.

This is not just our problem, but a larger one for our culture, and indeed, our world.

What we do understand is that a mandala view sees in all directions. It is not hierarchical. It is multivalent, polymorphous, always shifting and adapting to achieve balance and flow. Its rationality is different from the triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis.

But the old ways die hard, and the habit of Blake's single-vision is still deeply ingrained in our consciousness, our culture and politics, and our governance.

More on that in the coming months.