

WHAT'S OLD, WHAT'S NEW: BOOKS AND FILMS WORTH KNOWING

A PARADIGM SHIFT

Why Is It Needed? Is It Really Happening? Could It Be That Persons with Autism Are Leading the Way?

Who could imagine that a tale presenting a conversation between a gorilla and a man in an ordinary office building concerning the role of the human species in the grand scheme of things could have any relevance to the subject of autism? Or that a fable showing a different conversation between a bacterium and a disenchanting college student would enable us to examine our life choices in a new way? Or that the writings of a six year old who cannot speak, walk or feed himself could in any way provide us with a new way of thinking about persons with autism? Or finally, that a performance by a world renowned violinist would reveal to us a way to approach the diagnosis of autism for a family? Stay tuned to find out the answers to these questions and more.

Looking back over some of the countless books and films—biographies, autobiographies, documentaries, fiction, and self-help—that have appeared during these past years, I seem to perceive a rising tide or shift coming—a kind of watershed in the approach to the ever growing epidemic of autism. The shift seems to be all about attitude. I see a change of attitude, not only about autism, but also about the current economic crisis and the social, health and education debates. Perhaps this attitude change points to a major paradigm shift. Depending on where one looks, the scene looks different. Also, depending upon the particular pair of glasses one is looking through, the scene may also seem very different.

The 13th Annual International Rethinking Education conference came together to “rethink everything.” The conference syllabus book contains up to eight pages of material from each of the thirty-six presenters where ideas, poems, resources, and wisdom from the conference may be accessed. See www.rethinkingeducation.net. Daniel Quinn, one of the keynote speakers and author of the widely acclaimed, award-winning book, *ISHMAEL*, challenged us to revise the way we think and act. In fact, he called for a 2nd Renaissance equal in magnitude and impact to the 1st Renaissance that brought civilization out of the Middle Ages. In it our fundamental ways of thinking about the human species’ place in the world and the nature of the universe were radically changed. Quinn pointed out three aspects of our thinking that need to change if the human species will be able to survive:

- The idea: 1) that people are flawed—“no other species is flawed,”
2) that the way we live is the way human beings have lived from the beginning of time,
3) that humans belong to an order of things that is separate and above the rest of the living community.

His presentation and other interviews with him may be found through the Rethinking Education web site and on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNBRnrwD-Zg

He presented a graphic illustration of how we think and act that must change if we are to have a future and not become extinct. Yes, it is that serious. He said it is as though we humans live in the penthouse of a very tall building. Each and every day we descend from the penthouse and remove 200 bricks from the lower stories and take them up to the penthouse. (The figure 200 comes from the informed estimate of earth scientists of the number of species that are becoming extinct each day because of our unsustainable consumer practices.) Each and every day we continue to descend from the penthouse and remove 200 bricks from the lower stories and take them up to the penthouse. In other words we are shifting the biomass from one area to another

for our own immediate benefit. Unless we change our thinking **and** our actions, it is quite obvious that before long the penthouse where we live will come crashing down in a heap of rubble.

Shari Anker, who understands herself as a “w’ecologist,” has taken up Daniel Quinn’s challenge to rethink our relationship to the world we live in and has written *THE LIFE WORLD: Herman’s Adventures in Sustainability*, a fable where Billie the Bacterium instructs Herman the Human in an alternative, sustainable way of thinking. The book carries the ISBN 978-0-557-02834-4, December 2008. The author can be contacted at sranker@mac.com. This thoroughly researched topic by being placed in fable form with end notes instead of footnotes is easily and enthusiastically read and understood by all ages and compliments Quinn’s insights in *ISHMAEL*.

Dr. Bernard Rimland’s lighting bolt cast in 1964 with *INFANTILE AUTISM* shifted the focus of research of autism from psychological to bio-medical. This was followed ten years later by Barry Neil Kaufman’s *SON RISE* which further shifted the focus from telling the child what to do to listening to and following the lead of the child. The *DAN!* (Defeat Autism Now!) conferences stepped up the tempo of affirmation and change of attitude. *BACK IN MY ARMS* (2008) was quickly followed by *THE HORSE BOY* (2009) where the diagnosis of autism has become a call to adventure to experience with no predetermined outcome rather than a curse to endure. All of these are important and radical shifts in perspective and have led to new discoveries for treatment and development of the child. William Stillman’s insistence to look beneath the surface to see and honor the uniqueness inside each person, to presume intelligence and competence even when the person can not speak increases the volume of material supporting this paradigm shift. His books, *AUTISM AND THE GOD CONNECTION*, *THE SOUL OF AUTISM*, and his latest *EMPOWERED AUTISM PARENTING* all reinforce the special uniqueness of each child and the gifts that are present within.

Speaking of not speaking: I was given a great blessing to learn from a young boy when I encountered him one day at a small home-school school. He was sitting on his mother’s lap being taught pre-algebra by a brilliant IBM engineer. Marshall Ball could not speak, walk or feed himself. He could, however, communicate by pointing one letter at a time with his whole hand to a simple alphabet board held by his mother. The first poem I transcribed (as Marshall pointed to a letter, I wrote it down) was titled

My Harmony Prevails to Free

Even though my individuality finds sweet
 knowing perfection I listen for the
 answers to wishes from above. I listen to
 good thoughts like something cloudy over
 mountain tops. Fine messages clearly
 govern my thinking. Feelings grow
 harmoniously making Love possible.
 Harmony might justify every marvelous
 idea given to Love. The seeing Marshall
 hopes to free the hopeless. Dear harmony
 needs progress governing fine thinking
 that I feel. I see harmony as the final
 known answer.

The poem took an entire hour to write. Marshall spelled each word correctly. He was six years old at the time. I was astounded.

I was privileged to be asked to write the Foreword for a collection of his writings titled KISS OF GOD. Marshall was twelve years old and the book included poems he had written between the ages of five and twelve. The initial printing was 50,000 copies and within the first three months the book had sold over 200,000 copies.

A profound thinker and writer, Marshall is an old soul who had listened on tape to the entire 100 great books of the Western world before he was twelve years old. His parents presumed intelligence from the very beginning of his life and surrounded him with an environment rich in music and language and color and love even though there was no evidence of intelligence present in the first several years. Through his writings Marshall has given voice to countless children who are perhaps patiently waiting to be heard. This Fall ABC-TV did a program about a fourteen year old girl with autism who through a computer keyboard was able to break through the pain and silence to give voice to her articulate thoughts and feelings. She still does not speak, but oh does she communicate now. <http://abcnews.go.com/video/playerIndex?id=8282393>

A basic assumption has emerged:

The mind and spirit are ultimately subject only to its own
limitations, not those imposed by society or science.
Throughout history true stories of people from all circumstances
of life provide us, who take the opportunity to listen and see,
a fitting embodiment of the quality and persistence
of the human spirit.

Marshall (“the seeing Marshall (who) hopes to free the hopeless”) ends KISS OF GOD with a final question in

Free the World

Loving the world’s children
will have sweet marvelous friends
that prepare the way for freedom.
And my thought is to find help
for the children
that need dear thought to happen.
Right, sweet plans will free the righteous.
Listening to lovely music will calm
the troubles of the world.
I like fine perfect thought.
Make clear patience start.
Good might happen,
dear thought governs the start.
*Will we free the world to think perfectly
about the listening and
marvelous children?*

Yes, **the world** needs to shift its understanding of the silent and listening and marvelous children. The children are listening even if they cannot speak.

The change of attitude has been built upon the understanding that the one remaining fundamental freedom we have is to choose the attitude we take toward any given set of circumstances we are called to face. Such an approach is found in the same Chinese character that represents both crisis and opportunity. It is also beautifully embodied in the three time Academy Award winning film LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL

Finally, an anonymous author has shared the following account:

At Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York City, Itzhak Perlman, the violinist, came to give his performance. Just as he finished the first few bars, one of the four strings on his violin broke with a sound like gunfire. After a moment instead of going to get another string or violin, he simply closed his eyes and then signaled the conductor to begin again where he had left off. And he played with such passion and such power and such purity as the audience had never heard before. He had done the impossible; he had played a symphonic work with just three strings. When he finished, there was an awesome silence and then everyone rose and cheered and screamed in appreciation of what he had done.

He smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet the audience, and said, "You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left." Perhaps that is the definition of life—not just artists but for all of us. So, perhaps our task in this shaky, fast-changing, bewildering world in which we live is to make music, at first with all that we have, and then, when that is no longer possible, to make music with what we have left.

Yes, it is all about attitude and attitudes toward autism are changing with amazing frequency and amplitude. Is the world ready to participate in a paradigm shift? A new paradigm of what it means to be a human being? Maybe, just maybe, to be human is to be all things: to be human is to be diverse; to be human is to be without flaw (physical or moral); to be human is to be compassionate and non-judgmental toward all. Are persons with autism leading the way? Maybe! Just maybe!

Such a shift is certainly needed.

There is a new world coming; it is certainly coming.

All are invited to join us who have seen and welcomed its arrival for years.