

Mysteries

In Broad Daylight

**An E-Zine about the deeper
meaning of everyday life"**

By Mark Dillof. Ph.D., © 2000

Life is a mystery in broad daylight." - Sartre

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**Premiere Issue:
The Three Whales and Princess Diana**

What's the REAL story, Jerry?

The Philosophy Clinic's Division of Unfounded Research has been gathering some eye-opening statistics. On a typical day the average person encounters 1211 enigmas, 827 riddles, 235 puzzles, and 423 paradoxes. Very few of these mysteries seep through the many strata of rocks that serve to protect the inner chambers of our minds. Only if they make it to the interior, do they become full-fledged questions, but only on very rare occasions. Of course, during a tragedy or other personal crisis, questions do arise, and we feel compelled to ask, "Why? Why did it have to happen?" But even on an average Wednesday morning, we may find ourselves wondering, for example, "Why does my teenage son insist on wearing his baseball cap on backwards? Why has my wife suddenly become phobic about riding in elevators? Why have I been having a series of dreams involving snakes hiding under my desk at work?" The answers to such questions can lead to unexplored continents of self-inquiry, where insights of inestimable value can be found. Why then do we down our coffee, grab the paper, and run off to our busyness? It is because we know that questions often lead to self-doubt, and self-doubt could undermine our energies in the world, and even precipitate a crisis. But we can defer our

rendezvous with the interrogating sphinx only so long, and if we don't walk towards self-knowledge, life will drag us to self-knowledge kicking and screaming. The general animus towards self-reflection has created an immense gap in the world's understanding of itself. That may seem surprising since there exists an army of analysts — from psychologists to political scientists to cultural historians — seeking to make sense of it all. As to why, despite their pertinacious efforts, this gap is ever widening is a long story. Suffice it to say, we live in the information age, not the age of knowledge, and certainly not the age of wisdom. Because of this, the art of asking questions, questions that penetrate to the very heart of reality, has become a lost art.

Mysteries in Broad Daylight will be a guide to asking questions that are powerful enough to transform our emotions and to change our lives. In each issue, we shall delve into the mysteries of everyday life, the mysteries that stand before us in broad daylight, and yet which confound our understanding.

News stories are a particularly fruitful area of inquiry because of the immense impact these stories have on our everyday awareness. Like noisy masked revelers parading through the streets of New Orleans during Mardi Gras, so do these news stories peregrinate through our collective psyches, grabbing hold of our conscious attention as well as our unconscious feelings. Were we to unmask these revelers, we would be amazed to discover that their true identity is none other than the ancient myths and the eternal questions.

One such ancient riddle is, "Can we overcome our fate?" That is the overwhelming question that is really at issue in the story of the three whales, and in the story of the death of Princess Diana, the two news stories that we shall now analyze.

A Whale of a Tale

When a news story captures the popular imagination, it is not primarily because there is something practical at stake for our lives. By practical we mean, for example, whether or not Congress will raise taxes, or whether our country will enter into another war. What captivates us about many news stories is that the events which unfold replay an eternal myth, a story of great import for our lives. This is more obviously the case when a news story has no practical significance whatsoever.

For example, some years back there appeared a story of three whales who had become trapped, during low tide, behind a sand dune that blocked them from returning to the depths of the ocean. If the whales could not return, they would soon die. The whale story wasn't a small feature article. It received major coverage. This led to a huge outcry of public sympathy for the whales, enough so that the US government had to spend several million of dollars to have the Navy assist the whales by removing the sand dune so that the whales could swim out to sea.

The plight of the whales was an image of our own possible fate. It is not simply that we would become trapped by the situation that we create in the world -- by our family responsibilities and mortgages. For this situational fear is but an expression of a more fundamental anxiety. We dread that we shall die in the "shallows and miseries" of our immediate self, that we shall miss the crucial moment in the evolution of selfhood when the high tide of lust for a genuine mode of existence must carry us out to the dangerous but spirit-awakening sea of self-transcendence.

Many of us who have reached middle age feel inextricably trapped in ourselves -- in the fixity of our personality, by our habits and routines, by the increasing ossification of our life energies. We dread that the tide is rapidly going out and that it could be too late for

us to go with it. Then we sense that only a savior, a deus machina -- as symbolized by the US Navy -- can provide a way out of the enclosing sand dune of our existence. All that was what was behind the desperate measures to free the whales. Let us consider another tale of the effort to escape fate.

The Flight of Princess Di

There were many reasons why the public was fascinated by Princess Diana. She was beautiful and glamorous, and yet — despite her ascension to royalty — she became sympathetically viewed as an underdog. It is understandable, therefore, that Diana's tragic death would have gotten much media attention. But what is mysterious is why many people, who had not been particularly interested in the life of Princess Diana, found themselves captivated by the story of her tragic end. Behind the outward events was a mythic drama driven by an unanswered question. The question was, can we change our life in time so as to escape our fate?

We soon come to realize that changing our life is the most difficult of undertakings. We are not referring to the circumstantial changes that we all go through, but changing our very mode of existing, our fundamental outlook. Change is difficult for many reasons, not least of which is the immense weight of the past. We may long to be free, to have a new life, to be a different person, but what we did and who we were follows us wherever we may go. The Hindus call the consequences of past deeds on our present existence "karma." It is a terrible fact about life that we must deal with the past, with the present implications of our former deeds.

Change is not only difficult; it can also be a risky affair. In our desire for a new life, we may become frustrated, impatient, and we may panic. We then proceed in great haste and haste always creates a perilous situation. Rapid change -- breaking away too fast

from the situation -- leads us to exceed the bounds of the finite. This can cause damage to ourself and others.

The ancient Greeks were fearful of excess, imbalance, lack of harmony. They knew that anyone who overreaches life's limits gets punished by the forces of vengeance, which the Greeks pictured mythologically as the Furies. For us, the audience engrossed in this Sophoclean drama, the Furies took the form of the paparazzi who pursued Diana and her new love on their motorcycles. As she sped with Dodi to a new life, away from it all, the forces of her past -- particularly her publicity seeking, public relations infested life -- pursued her till she reached her fatal end, the car crash.

Of course, it did not have to happen the way it did. The tragedy that transpired was merely the result of an unfortunate series of mistakes — an inebriated driver and so on. It all seems contingent on chance circumstances. But the mythic layer of our consciousness knows nothing of chance. Experienced mythically, the auto accident was not an accident but a "fatality" — the unfolding of Diana's fate. That is what grabbed so many people's awareness.

Free of Fate, and Beyond Tragedy

Philosophy subscribes to the notion that there exists a secret knowledge, which if known, will liberate our soul and free us from our fate. This is the notion that the truth shall make us free, not just any truth, but self-knowledge. Indeed it is true that self-knowledge is the one force in the universe that has the power to burn away our karma, to free us from our Fate. Then we need not fear the Furies, nor Nemesis, nor even the paparazzi, that relentlessly pursue us.

Philosophy is usually thought of as a body of ideas, but it is better to think of it as a body of criticism. Matthew Arnold once stated that, "Culture is criticism." Culture is not about going to museums, classical concerts, and reading the great books. Nor is it about playing the violin and writing poetry. Real culture is the cultivation of the spirit.

To cultivate the spirit is to illuminate our interests, anxieties, desires, and conflicts. This self-illumination of our immediate self leads us to question whether our manner of living can succeed in granting us happiness and fulfillment. That type of questioning, that doubt of our usual answers, is the criticism that engenders culture. Another way of saying it is that to become cultured is to channel and focus the energy -- that had been dissipated amid a myriad of egocentric concerns -- so that our spirits will have the power to soar into the beyond.

Happy Trails__

Now for the exam. How do you feel after reading Mysteries in Broad Daylight?__

- A) "Indifferent."
- B) "Hey, this e-zine's interesting!"
- C) "I feel a bit nauseous."
- D) "I feel a combination of wonder and nausea."
- E) (You don't say anything, but just smile beatifically.)

If your response is "A," you are legally comatose.

If "B," you have merely an aesthetic relation to knowledge. You need to lose your distance, to "get down."

If "C," you have an authentic existential relation to knowledge.

If "D," you are proficient in the warrior's art of balancing the terror of life with the wonder.

If "E," either you are a Buddha, or else you are an airhead believing yourself to be a Buddha and you need to get a life.

So stay posted, bookmark this website, check it regularly, tell your friends, send us your questions, ideas, and criticism, look out for the next issue of Mysteries in Broad Daylight. And stay awake to the marvels and mysteries all around you. (P.S. Do not attempt to engage in all of these activities simultaneously.)