

## THE PUZZLE, MISSING PICTURE AND PART

“For us how difficult to become whole,  
a part is always left out  
and that is the part we have to choose.”  
Pope John Paul II

Increasingly today, the individual cannot find a meaningful place in society - that "fit" that gives their life a sense of direction and personal fulfilment. We are puzzled - often painfully so - by our inability to find social roles or functions that seem worthwhile and satisfying. As isolated individuals we appear to be parts of some unknown jigsaw puzzle. We cannot easily find our fit because we have lost the overall guiding "Big Picture" of our world - that common, coherent, cohesive belief structure necessary for social beings to make sense of an always uncertain and changing world.

We are desperately trying to fit together without knowing what the completed puzzle is supposed to look like. We have lost our vision of the Good, the moral order and goal of life. We are suffering from the "death of God" or the absence of a social Norm, which provides order and gives personal meaning. The puzzle has always been the human condition and the parts are the individuals who can only make sense of their world by being shown the Big Picture - that unified cultural and religious outlook which explains life and provides personal meaning.

The etymology of the word religion means to collect and connect, to gather and tie together. A commonly shared vision of the "Good" - the sanctioned end for the individual's life - is what gives separate and limited individual lives their community and continuity. The connective links established by such a shared vision are the conduits through which life flows from the seminal past through the bearable present into a fulfilling future.

I think an accurate description of the modern individual is that of an exposed and vulnerable part searching for a meaningful whole or Big Picture in which to feel unified and secure - saved, safe and at home in the world. We are puzzled parts not knowing where we fit in and what to do with our unfitness. As a result, not a few of us throw fits and fall out of the Big Picture to wander the desert of a meaningless and desolate existence.

No individual is a whole unto itself. Every individual as a part needs to fit together with other parts in order to maintain its life. In periods when the Big Picture prevails there is no puzzle for the parts learn automatically by cultural conditioning how to fit together. In our modern time we lack such an enabling clear Big Picture and cultural conditioning to provide our fit.

If we are rejecters of the West's former Big Picture we tend to rely on one of a number of competing small pictures - sub-cultures, cults, counter-cultures - select enclaves of the "saved" to explain the otherwise damned and divided world to us. Or if we still rely on the Western Norm we try to get by with whatever convenient corrective lenses we can find to artificially focus our agnostic astigmatism which at best can only provide us with a fuzzy Big Picture.

I think it is necessary for us today to see clearly just how blurred or absent our Big Picture actually is and how this effects our morality. I suggest we have only three choices to cope with our lack of a viable Big Picture:

The first is we may try to find small picture substitutes, which is at best a risky business and can end in psychological dependency or even self-destruction. The second is we may continue to do the best we can with a make-do Norm which leaves us insecure and vulnerable to confused and contradictory values. The third is we can take intentional, conscious responsibility for our predicament and see it as a part of a maturation process of the evolution of human consciousness.

If we take this third way we may come to see we do not need a Big Picture to order our lives and enable us as parts to fit in. For those capable, as members of the culture of consciousness, we will be creating our "Big Picture" as we go, each of us in open dialogue with the other, exchanging our equal personal values and learning to cultivate persons as works of responsive and responsible art.

As Philip Rieff wrote in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, "Self-knowledge again made social is the principle of control upon which the emergent culture may yet be able to make itself stable. Affluence achieved, the creation of a knowing rather than a believing person, able to enjoy life without erecting high symbolic hedges around it, distinguishes [this new culture] from its predecessor."

If we do make it as Western Culture, it will be as a culture of consciousness beyond our genetic or social programming while still honouring that earlier unconsciously acquired foundation. If we do not choose consciousness, then we will fall back again as all other cultures have done before us, into the relative unconsciousness of our more instinctual mid-brain tyrants – perhaps then to begin the climb into those challenging and anxious frontal lobes of conscious choice once again.