

**WHEN WHAT IS GIVEN IS WHAT IS NEEDED****EZRA HEWING**

I once read that Goethe claimed he was a very old man when he finally learnt to read, and in the same sense I am still at a very early stage in learning to see dynamically; there is still much in Henri Bortoft's work that I have yet to absorb. Nonetheless, I am indebted to Henri for the influence he has had on my work in the field of mental health. His writings have helped me to better understand the body of knowledge known as the Human Givens, itself the result of a holistic approach to psychology have enabled me to look afresh at challenges which elude the grasp of systematic or reductionist approaches to explaining the world; given me the patience to let go of habits of thought, even when it has taken years, and let meaning present itself on its own terms.

Adopting richer organising ideas gave rise to the insights contained in Cannabis-induced Caetextia theory - Caetextia meaning context-blindness; the only model to date which accounts for the paradoxical effects of cannabis use that cause so much confusion in the substance abuse field. Reading Henri's work also helped me to perceive the relationship between these seeming paradoxes: why using cannabis increases the risk of developing mental health problems like depression and schizophrenia; why some people find that cannabis helps them to relax, reduce stress and alleviate the symptoms of mental health problems like depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder; and why some people find that using cannabis gives rise to unusual thoughts and access to imagination and creativity.

In developing a resource to address mental health in an Islamic context for Muslims and Muslim communities, Henri's work enabled me to better grasp the central Islamic concept of divine unity – an insight reduced from its allegorical presentation in the poetry of the Qur'an, to a rigid set of totalitarian rules and regulations in the contemporary world - and see how it could underpin a holistic approach to mental health and wellbeing. Henri's writings on the nature of authentic and counterfeit wholes helped me understand the comments of Muhammad al-Ghazali, the 12<sup>th</sup> century Muslim polymath, on the nature of the self: *"There has been tremendous confusion in this matter, because for purposes of examination and teaching, the essential self has to be given a name...this is at best an illustrative distinction."* (Shah) The holistic approach to knowledge has echoed down the ages and survived because of the commitment of those truly dedicated to making reality a little clearer to the rest of us.

**The Human Givens**

The Human Givens Approach (see Griffin) is a set of organising ideas which seeks to understand how individuals and societies function, by drawing upon the latest scientific understandings from neurobiology and psychology, as well as ancient wisdom and [new insights; the role of the REM state in programming psychological templates during pregnancy and discharging emotional arousal during dream-sleep, for example.](#)

At the heart of the Human Givens Approach is the insight that humans, like all organic beings, come into this world with a set of needs. To the extent that those needs are met in healthy ways, we thrive. Conversely, when they are poorly met we suffer distress and, if we suffer sustained exposure to distress, we become unwell and at greater risk of developing addictions and serious mental illnesses.

As well as physical needs, our emotional needs include the need to give and receive attention, a connection to the wider community, intimacy, a balanced self-esteem which comes from a sense of achievement and competency, a sense of meaning and purpose which can come through stretching ourselves to learn or commitment to something larger than ourselves. To compliment these needs, nature has gifted us with instinctive knowledge, an observing self that experiences the world as a unique centre of awareness, a dreaming brain which discharges emotional arousal enabling us to restore our emotional templates to their default setting. Our innate resources can help us to meet our needs, provided that we use them properly and are living in a healthy environment. These resources, together with our physical and emotional needs make up what are termed the human givens.

Having worked to help corporate businesses change their perception towards mental health and wellbeing in the workplace, I was left to reflect on the limitations and pitfalls of working in a way which reduces the individual to a part, rather than an authentic whole.

**How do we know when we have absorbed an organising idea?**

I remain concerned, however, about the dangers of reducing an organising idea to a system and how this might affect the future of workplace wellbeing. The pattern of the human givens organising idea about human functioning allows us actively to perceive what is missing in a person's story or in their lives. As a result, when seeing through that pattern, questions and interventions naturally arise in response to the gaps we perceive. I think such perceptions arise most frequently when we are in flow and that the richness of the pattern bears a relationship to how well refined our own emotional templates are. In contrast, there have been times when, while working with somebody, I have become stuck; when I had the feeling that I had tried everything in my toolkit, when I revisited questions to try and get better information because I was sure I must have missed something. Those are the times when we know that we should tolerate the ambiguity of not knowing the answer but, finally, in exasperation, we may fall back on counting through the list of needs and resources in a rote fashion. Thus, the person we are working with becomes a set of fragmented parts, a collection of needs and resources. When we do this, we turn the human givens approach into a system or a checklist to be scored, and it ceases to be for us a pattern of perception, a way of seeing with greater clarity. Clearly, it is necessary, particularly when we are learning about needs and resources for the first time, or when we ask a client to use an Emotional Needs Audit as a tool to get them thinking about their needs, to consider needs and resources individually.

However, after a time, to become a truly holistic way of seeing, rather than a checklist of disconnected parts or, worse still, a vague nominalisation, our attention must shift to perceive the relationships between needs and resources. When this happens, our minds begin to form a template, or lens, through which we perceive – a new organ of perception. The holistic perception of needs is authentic in the sense that the individual or organisation is perceived as they really are; coming into being from moment to moment. While completing an Emotional Needs Audit captures a valuable snapshot at a specific time, our emotional needs are constantly in flux, and so they should be; our shared need to be stretched, drives us to refine our emotional templates, seeking completion, and when we stop doing so we stagnate. The same is true for a business or an organisation. If it is to be “dynamic” and in tune with the evolving needs of its workers and customers, it must be “unfinished” and never “fixed, ie dead”(Bortoft). A living organisation must conform to the law of living things, which the human givens approach articulates. A life form must take nutrition from the environment and absorb it correctly in order to sustain and repair itself. When a culture exists where enough people can actively engage with this quality of attention and it becomes a shared perception, wellbeing will become the norm instead of the exception.

**References**

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