

The Wisdom of Insecurity- Alan Watts Book Notes

“There is no other reality than present reality, so that, even if one were to live for endless ages, to live for the future would miss the point everlastingly.”

Chapter 1: The Age of Anxiety

To keep up this “standard” most of us are willing to put up with lives that consist largely in doing jobs that are a bore, earning the means to seek relief from the tedium by intervals of hectic and expensive pleasure. These intervals are supposed to be the real *living*, the real purpose served by the necessary evil of work. Or we imagine that the justification of such work is the rearing of a family to go on doing the same kind of thing, in order to rear another family... and so ad infinitum.

A careful study of comparative religion and spiritual philosophy reveals that abandonment of belief, of any clinging to a future life for one’s own, and of any attempt to escape from finitude and mortality, is a regular and normal stage in the way of the spirit.

Paradox as it may seem, we likewise find life meaningful only when we have seen that it is without purpose, and know the “mystery of the universe” only when we are convinced that we know nothing about it at all.

Chapter 2: Pain and Time

The power of memories and expectations is such that for most human beings the past and the future are not *as* real, but *more* real than the present. The present cannot be lived happily unless the past has been “cleared up” and the future is bright with promise.

Chapter 4: The Wisdom of the Body

Generally speaking, the civilized man does not know what he wants. He works for success, fame, a happy marriage, fun, to help other people, or to be a “real person.” But these things are not real wants because they are not actual things. They are the by-products, the flavors and atmospheres of real things— shadows which have no existence apart from some substance. Money is the perfect symbol of all such desires, being a mere symbol of real wealth, and to make it one’s goal is the most blatant example of confusing measurements with reality.

The desire for security and the feeling of insecurity are the same thing.

We can hardly begin to consider this problem unless it is clear that the craving for security is itself a pain and a contradiction, and the more we pursue it, the more painful it becomes.

The principal thing is to understand that there is no safety or security.

Chapter 6: The Marvelous Moment

Memory never captures the essence, the present intensity, the concrete reality of an experience. It is, as it were, the corpse of an experience, from which the life has vanished.

Pain and the effort to be separate from it are the same thing.

When you discover this, the desire to escape “merges” into the pain itself and vanishes.

It is only through silence that one can discover something new to talk about. One who talked incessantly, without stopping to look and listen, would repeat himself ad nauseam.

It is the same with thinking, which is really silent talking. It is not, by itself, open to the discovery of anything new, for its only novelties are simply rearrangements of old words and ideas.

For most of us, the other half of sanity lies simply in seeing and enjoying the unknown, just as we can enjoy music without knowing either how it is written or how the body hears it.

We learn nothing of very much importance when it can be explained entirely in terms of past experience.

If we are open only to discoveries which will accord with what we know already, we may as well stay shut.

Chapter 7: The Transformation of Life

You will cease to feel isolated when you recognize, for example, that you do not *have* a sensation of the sky: you *are* that sensation. For all purposes of feeling, your sensation of the sky is the sky, and there is no “you” apart from what you sense, feel, and know. This is why the mystics and many of the poets give frequent utterance to the feeling that they are “one with the All”, or “united with God,”.

To “know” reality you cannot stand outside it and define it; you must enter into it, be it, and feel it.

When you realize that you live in, that indeed that you *are* this moment now, and no other, that apart from this there is no past and no future, you must relax and taste to the full, whether it be pleasure or pain. At once it becomes obvious why this universe exists, why conscious beings have been produced, why sensitive organs, why space, time, and change. The whole problem of justifying nature, of trying to make life mean something in terms of its future, disappears utterly. Obviously, it all exists for this moment. It is a dance, and when you are dancing you are not intent on getting somewhere.

To the undivided mind, death is another moment, complete like every moment, and cannot yield its secret unless lived to the full.

Nothing is more creative than death, since it is the whole secret of life. It means that the past must be abandoned, that the unknown cannot be avoided, that "I" cannot continue, and that nothing can be ultimately fixed. When a man knows this, he lives for the first time in his life. By holding his breath, he loses it. By letting it go he finds it.

Chapter 8: Creative Morality

The meaning of freedom can never be grasped by the divided mind. If I feel separate from my experience, and from the world, freedom will seem to be the extent to which I can push the world around, and fate the extent to which the world pushes me around.

The more my actions are directed towards future pleasure, the more I am incapable of enjoying any pleasures at all. For all pleasures are present, and nothing save complete awareness of the present can even begin to guarantee future happiness.

The mind must be interested or absorbed in something, just as a mirror must always be reflecting something. When it is not trying to be interested in itself– as if a mirror would reflect itself– it must be interested, or absorbed, in other people and things.

There is no formula for generating the authentic warmth of love. It cannot be copied. You cannot talk yourself into it or rouse it by straining at the emotions or by dedicating yourself solemnly to the service of mankind. Everyone has love, but it can only come out when he is convinced of the impossibility and the frustration of trying to love himself. This conviction will not come through condemnations, through hating oneself, through calling self-love all the bad names in the universe. It comes only in the awareness that one has no self to love.

Chapter 9: Religion Reviews

By thoughts, or mental words, we distinguish or "make" things. Without thoughts, there are no "things"; there is just undefined reality.

When we see reality as it is we are free to use thought without being fooled by it. It "returns to heaven" in the sense that we recognize it as part of reality, and not something standing outside it.

Eternal life is realized when the last trace of difference between "I" and "now" has vanished– when there is just this "now" and nothing else.

By contrast, hell or "everlasting damnation" is not the everlastingness of time going on forever, but of the unbroken circle, the continuity and frustration of going round and round in pursuit of something which can never be attained. Hell is the fatuity, the everlasting impossibility, of

self-love, self-consciousness, and self-possession. It is trying to see one's own eyes, hear one's own ears, and kiss one's own lips.

The fulfillment of the divine purpose does not lie in the future. It is found in the present, not by an act of resignation to immovable fact, but in seeing that there is no one to resign.

It is obvious that the only interesting people are interested people, and to be completely interested is to have forgotten about "I".