

Paul Verhaeghe, Hedgehogs United

Everyone of us likes to be independent, taking decisions for ourselves. Other times, we enjoy the snugness of being together, craving the warm protection of the group.

However different these needs may be, both are essentially human. Arthur Schopenhauer, not particularly a humanity loving philosopher, expressed them as follows. Humans are like hedgehogs on a chilly autumn evening. They curl up next to one another to keep warm. But if they come too close, they prick each other. So they move away, but evidently they get cold again, and a never ending movement follows of seeking each other's warmth, hurting each other, and taking distance, over and over again.

As humans, we are not that different. Sigmund Freud pinpoints the roots in the crude foundation of our relationships. 'I love you so much I could eat you'. 'I hate you so much that I could spit you out'. Love and hate are strong motivators and our oldest fear is to be left alone, to be abandoned. In contrast we also fear the other being too close, being on, or even under our skin. So we push the other away, we need to be on our own.

Experience teaches that a balance between autonomy and intimacy provides a solid ground for happiness. The idea of balance is relative, because the intimacy aspect dominates. The reason is elementary. We belong to the social animals, not to the solitary ones. We delight and excel in group. If an individual of a social species is left by itself, there are two explanations. Or that animal is ill, or it is being banned. Often both at the same time. This explains why children all over the world are punished by letting them stand in a far off corner and deny them the safety of the group.

This brings us to the field of education, and to the home of our childhood where we learned to be alone as well as being together. In that home a lot of things can go wrong, causing people to have extreme difficulties building up confidence in the other, or the opposite, to have extreme difficulties releasing the other. Nowadays, there is a lot of fuss in the field of psychiatry concerning attachment disorders. Our children attach themselves too much, too little, or even both at the same time. This leads to a lonely life as an adult. The easy explanation is to blame the mother, she must have done things wrong, and surely, we should do something about these mothers!

Obviously this is a naive line of thought permitting us to get away with a far more important question. Why does our society produce so many lonely people? Our era is the individualistic one, and the myth of the happy single obscures our longing for the other in combination with our distrust of this other.

This is strange. We live in one of the safest regions of the world and we have never been so afraid of one another! Why do we view the other as a possible threat? In my opinion, the explanation is to be found in the dominant nature of neoliberal ideology, setting the tone of the past thirty years or so. When it started, Margaret Thatcher produced a very prophetic formulation: 'There is no such thing as society, there are only individuals'. In the meantime, neoliberalism has installed a society with isolated and ever competing individuals. An unexpected side effect was the growing need for top down control of everything and everyone. We have been turned into lonely hedgehogs filling in forms for every step we take. And we have to take it, that's for sure. The golden goose is called success.

Michael Douglas puts it quite clearly in one of 1987's blockbusters 'Wall street': "Greed is good. Greed is right. Greed works." Neoliberalism has realised its own principle, a 'rational' selfishness. We do no longer parent, or teach or love. We invest in parenthood, education and relations. And if the investment does not return satisfactorily, we dump the lot, and move on to the next. Get rid of the weakest links in order to boost productivity. The other is first of all a competitor. Team spirit has become rare and needs to be boosted by team building weekends, ironically enough filled with survival of the fittest games.

In the early stages of neoliberalism the principle was limited to industry and trade, but today it dominates everyday life. An ironic example can be found in so called 'reality shows' on TV, with striking titles such as The Weakest Link, Temptation Island or Top Starter. The irony is that they pretend to show us who we really are, whilst they are dictating how we should behave. Their message is clear: the ideal human is a rat-race-loving player, always looking for number one. We have to score. In bed, at work, in life. The winner takes it all.

Under the skin of our successful society, fear thrives, from fear of failure to a general distrust of the menacing other. Indeed, if everybody is only looking for number one, then no one is to be trusted. This explains another surprising effect of neoliberalism: the ever-growing burden of top down control, audits, evaluations, protocols and the like. CEO's are everywhere, meaning chief executive officers. Mind you: 'officers', obviously, we are all part of the army. We may have freed ourselves from god, but the almighty eye of CCT is everywhere. Beware if you do not follow the rules!

For the last thirty years, our neoliberal society has been promoting competitive individualism and top down control. Today, the smoke is clearing and we are left with a world of winners and losers, all of them on their own. The winner, swell but lonely at the top. No favours for the lady. The loser, lonely and ignored anyway. Both of them

controlled by Big Brother, with almost no autonomy left. And we are sick of it, both literally and metaphorically.

We should remember the hedgehogs. Loneliness means cold. And because we are social animals, we need the other in order to feel protected and warm. Today, we need global warming on a societal level. We don't need a new messiah for that. On the contrary; we should remember that we love our autonomy as well. We need no messiah to enforce top down innovations. Change will come from grass root initiatives, in our own streets and neighbourhoods, bringing people together with a common goal, teaching them to trust one another, instead of feeling afraid and helpless. Citizen initiatives testify to citizen power. These TED lectures themselves are one example of many: people join ideas and forces to make a common cause. And the beauty of it is that by helping others, we are helping ourselves, because we feel engaged, related, and alive. The moment has come to install, once again, a society that advances solidarity and autonomy instead of powerless individualism.

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