

Open House Talk – Oksana Yakushko, PhD

February 2016

“ON BEING HOT AND BOTHERED IN PSYCHOLOGY AND OUR WORLD”

Dear Prospective Students, Visitors, Alums, Staff and Colleagues,

Another warm welcome!

As a title of my presentation shows, I want to start my talk by asking “What is it that bothers you? Makes you hot under your collar? Makes you agitated, angry, sad, or agitated to no end?”

I imagine that list can include a number of things such as coffee not to your liking, a partner ignoring you, or that driver that cut you off rudely in traffic on the way here.

Not that much wrong, in my book, with being bothered by such bothersome day to day stuff.

However, what I want to invite us all to consider is far broader. To consider the suffering we see and other time look away from. To consider the impact of that suffering on people and on the next generations, on our Earth. To consider our own suffering.

To consider what we do about it or, much harder, what we don't do about it.

Suffering is “negative” in today's psychological milieu. As many of you know, the fields of counseling and psychology as well as the broader culture are quite negative about anything negative. The new old thing is “positive psychology.” You've heard about it, right? It's supposedly is good for everything, from your health, to your grades, to your ability to just get done with that trauma and get back on your two feet, to leading business, to healing from cancer, and, certainly, to curing any mental illness out there. Positive psychology like positive messages that have been foundation of this current iteration of America – recall the “pursuit of happiness” right, and it draws us and sells really well.

But back to my original negative question... I think that what bothers us, truly bothers us, can only stem from our ability to see the negative, to face suffering, and to use those beautiful powerful so-called negative emotions to give us courage and wisdom to do something about what we see.

The foundations of depth psychology, the elders we honor here, were all radicals. Freud and Jung challenged every foundation of Western and then Victorian society – their methods are still among the most utilized by all kinds of radical fields from gender studies to cultural studies to post-colonial and liberation perspectives. Maria Gimbutas dared to be a feminist archeologist when she wrote about her discoveries of thousands upon thousands years of peaceful matrifocal societies that worshipped the Goddess and created art rather than weapons, Goddesses that her colleagues insisted were early forms of male pornography. Hillman and Woodman questioned all manner of cultural “truths” and norms. Dr. Chris Downing, our faculty here, the first woman who presided over the Academy of Religious Studies, brought together myth, spirit, Freud, body, desire, sexuality, gender in ways that still shape ideas in fields far and wide outside of psychology or religious studies.

I have just submitted for publication an article entitled negative reflections on positive psychology. Do you know that there are hundreds upon hundreds handbooks, journals, grant lines and full on university research centers now dedicated to “positive psychology”!! Well, I grew tired of unquestioned assumptions behind positive psychology. Such as that positive self-affirmations, thought control, and right behavior ameliorate any problem. Because while sometimes they might, many or most times the so-called problems are institutional, systemic, and historical, and not dependent on individual’s self-control.

Before writing my article I have known about many alternative perspectives to positive psychology information but it was eye opening even for me to discover that, for example, in medicine the insistence that positive thinking is better for treatment is now called the new tyranny; that in business “Prozac leadership” has been blamed for many growing business problems including Enron type disasters; that in education insisting on positive attitudes, especially among students from marginalized backgrounds, results in drop in their performance and their depression; that teaching girls that all they need is their “girl power” to succeed results in girls feeling personally responsible for their failure to break gender glass ceilings; or that African American girls who are taught to address racism through positive self-affirmations appear to instead learn to be deferent to authorities, to ignore conflict, and to internalize problems. So you know, research shows that anger is apparently far better for your cardio-vascular health than suppression or replacement of it. Regret teaches valuable life lessons. Sadness is essential for empathy. And discontent is far more likely to get you to care – to be green, to vote, or to give to charities. This is all coming from large scale empirical research!

Hear me, hear me – I am not against love, peace and joy and other good things. But psychology or religion or any other form of human endeavor that exclusively values these

while denigrating other forms of human experience, or elevating these as paragons of all good things, in my view are problematic.

Tending the soul in and of the world – Pacifica’s motto. While sounds vaguely positive, this is a task like no other difficult task. Those of you who have been in your own therapy or analysis, offered it to others, used psychological knowledge to create, to heal, to address social problems – you know that soul-tending is an arduous experience. One can fix problems, set goals but still that sense of wholeness, the acceptance of imperfection, humanity, limits, aliveness is often so much more difficult to hold and to reach.

I ended my article on positive psychology with quote from Huxley’s Brave New World, a book incidentally I read in as underground market copy when I was still a Soviet citizen growing up in Ukraine. In this quote, John, also called the Savage, is debating one of the World State’s World Controllers Mustapha Mond. Mond, like other Controllers, is among those who insist that behavioral modifications, mind-control, and requirement of happiness are the only acceptable way of ensuring state’s stability and viability. Something I absolutely experienced in Soviet times under scientific socialism and scientific atheism ideals. Something that I think is carried out in this country just through consumerism and individualism.

In this quote from Huxley John the Savage says:

“But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin.”

"In fact," said Mustapha Mond, "you're claiming the right to be unhappy."

"All right then," said the Savage defiantly, "I'm claiming the right to be unhappy."

"Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen to-morrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind." There was a long silence.

"I claim them all," said the Savage at last.

And so I hope that all of us similarly claim the weight of all of humanity: the horrors of global warming, racism, homophobia, sexism, ethnocentrism, poverty, violence – these on both

social and individuals levels but also horrors of the day to day interpersonal violence, being unseen or unloved, projections, perfectionism, and more.

Claim these so we can feel them, see them, face them – individually and collectively. And to question, and to act while we get hot and bothered.

And so with the Savage and all of you here, I want to end with the nod to Claiming it All – our human right to be whole, not merely happy but hot, bothered, and growing.

Thank you for considering Pacifica and again, welcome!