

# BELONGING AND OBEDIENCE

Frank R.Morris

Lately, my mind has been doing mental pirouettes around a problem that is at the heart of human psychological freedom.

I'd dance and swirl with the issue as I drove along to the city or walked in the country. Vacation trips have revealed to me, over and over again, how many options we all exercise as we set up our work, play, and home schedules. What has fascinated me are the ways we lose our solitariness and belong to this or that: a social club, a team, a work place of compatriots, a church, or a group dedicated to a given purpose.

In other words, there is something about human nature that pulls us to belong.

I've been in conversation with those who manage prison facilities recently, and it is no doubt that, even in jail, people will develop group gangs while fearing isolation and solitary confinement. Everywhere I go, and everyone I talk with in the last few months have, in some way or another, fed into my private obsession with the theme of belonging and solitariness.

My reading, also. For instance, if Anthony Storr were to have been an actor or athlete, you would have to term his output as being "a very good performer". I've loved his books on psychotherapy and, while I occasionally carry on a mental argument with him on fine points, love to read his material. He is a teacher and therapist in England and one of his summing-up books just came forth: *Feet of Clay*. In the course of reading (and enjoying) Storr's book, I kept my philosophical practice of seeking to pierce to the heart of theory. At one point I was quite relieved when Storr said that his book on human destructiveness pointed out that a tendency to mental obedience was the heart of darkness for humans.

Having sifted Storr's book for every jewel I could discover, I went back to my solitary pursuit of thinking about human nature, adding my own bits of developmental thinking aligned with analysis of unresolved childhood elements. So, (I reasoned to myself) if the backdrop of people is to be obedient given their long period of dependency and their fear of isolation, their solution is some type of joining to a group. In the process of that "joining of something bigger", they begin to lose their identity as they get brainwashed with a given rhetoric, way of doing things, way of appearing, and way of relating. Then, as all who know me realize, I went off into mentally thinking through right wing religious groups since I waded through them as a young man.

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A thought occurred to me during my mental wanderings: Isn't it interesting that Anthony Storr is best known for his book on solitude? In that work, he shows the downright wonder and goodness of thinking and being on your own. I continued in my thinking: It follows logically, of course. If you are going to hypothesize that the major problem of people is obediently joining the group mind and you encourage people to have independent thinking and living, you had best encourage them to deal with solitude.

My mental journey with this particular set of thoughts continued as I wondered about myself and my situation. Here I am in Indian Summer in a Technicolor forest with a magnificent view and find myself struggling with how to belong, be a part of a group, and have meaningful communion with people! In no way, shape or form will I sacrifice my mind by joining with illiterates who spout some meaningless chatter; the thought is abhorrent to me. There is no doubt, however, that I loved every moment of group therapy and training group weekends. Those were highlights because they were real. If there were some way I could have that excitement in my forest, there would be no hesitation.

Then, right in the middle of my thinking muddle, I chanced upon an excellent book. Great books, by the way, occasionally appear out of the blue - where you least expect them. I have wanted to re-study linguistics lately and picked up a book of a disciple of Noam Chomsky: *Patterns in the Mind* (Language and Human Nature) by Ray Jackendoff. I expected little from the book. Hopefully, I would get a few ideas that would justify spending the five dollars it cost (it was on the bargain table).

So, I'm sailing along reading this book and found the missing piece that had sent my mind on pirouettes. Maybe before I say what it was, I might say that I really admire Jackendoff's book. Anyway, his last seven pages are exactly what I needed to gather some closure on my recent mental whirlings. He reviews how people are internally driven to be part of some group, how that group then takes over their thinking, being, acting and conduct, and how getting kicked out of a group causes immense stress. He adds that "pressures toward group uniformity are at the bottom of racism, religious intolerance, homophobia, and the strong movement to repress minority languages and customs throughout the world" (p216-217). A phrase then hit my eye: "cognitive stress".

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Gosh. I love it. "Cognitive stress". I take that to mean that if you do not go along with a given group rhetoric, you experience a bit of mental anguish. There is a drive to conformity and if you begin to challenge the group mind (or lack of it), there is an exclusion process that leaves you isolated. Alone. You failed to discipline your look, talk and actions according to the group, and exclusion is the result.

Hmmm. Have I learned anything from these mental gymnastics. Yes, I learned that I am not alone because I keep finding people like Ray Jackendoff, Anthony Storr, and a host of poets and thinkers who I happen to join in going meta to society. That means there is solitude of a sort, but not soul solitude. I'm in good company when I pick and choose my way through world writers who conceive of a world built on love and not conformity.