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<http://www.skills-for-life.org/>

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Skills-for-Life workshop – introduction

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Anyone with open eyes can see that our world is heading for trouble and, indeed, is already in difficulties. We all face a future of unprecedented uncertainty, whether we are looking at the natural world, human society or ourselves as individuals. Our atmosphere, which for millions of years has supported and protected us, is under assault from human activity. The flow of refugees from the Middle East and Africa and the problems of accommodating them – even in those countries that are willing to consider it – shows no signs of diminishing, and across the world, human disagreements are still being resolved through violence. At a personal level, the certainties of employment and future security that earlier generations could rely on, have all-but disappeared. If you learn a skill or trade now, or graduate as some kind of specialist or another, there is no guarantee that what you know will continue to earn you a living for the rest of your life, or even for the rest of the decade. Indeed, if we look at the corporate world that so dominates our lives, one of the few certainties is that in every corporation somebody is trying to cut jobs in the interests of increasing value for shareholders – which usually means other corporations. If you add uncertainty of continuing employment (or even of finding employment in the first place) to the fact that so many people are saddled with debt from the beginning of their working life, it’s not surprising that so many people suffer from some degree of stress and anxiety.

Then there is the issue of how we deal with each other as individuals, groups and nations. Recently one of my 6th-graders asked why we have wars, and I said that it’s because people see each other as different, either as individuals or as nations, instead of recognizing their (or our) common humanity. We can see all too clearly what happens when countries let their differences dominate their decisions, or when

people let their political disagreements define themselves and their relationships. Even if we say to ourselves that we are not like that, this is itself an expression of difference and separation.

Where to start in addressing these issues? Can we as people find a way to engage constructively in solving the problems that confront us? Over and over again, the traditionally promoted remedies fall short, and we need to understand why it is so difficult to bring change in society and people's behavior – which of course includes us. The common denominator for all of the problems I've listed is people. The world is the way it is because we people are the way we are. Climate change, political conditions and war that force millions to flee their homes, the pursuit of short-term profit at the expense of long-term stability, over-exploitation of natural resources, all stem from the way we people put our own interests ahead of the greater good. And what is that greater good?

If we look at the whole biosphere, we can see that every living organism, from microbes and grass to elephants and whales is supported by other life forms and supports others in their turn. Nearly a hundred years ago, the philosopher George Gurdjieff described this interrelationship as 'The Law of Reciprocal Maintenance of All that Exists'. This might be evident to anybody, but Gurdjieff included the additional principle that we as human beings have a particular part to play. If every living creature, including us, depends on other life-forms, and supports others in turn, what is our responsibility? Is it enough just to be good people, or is there something more? Without wanting to spend too long at this point, I would suggest that our role is to help serve the developing future, in an evolving planet, not least since we are – as far as we know – the only terrestrial species that can look very far ahead.

This year, above all, it should be clear that the kind of change we and the world needs is not going to come through the political system. Most politicians in this country and in much of the rest of the world, are motivated by what benefits them, rather than what benefits their people, let alone the planet. And our politics is almost entirely materialist – concerned with the large-scale organization of people as

consumers. It's based on the idea that people can be prodded into this or that action by laws and tax breaks. Even outside the political system itself, successive waves of political activism are broken on the ramparts of an entrenched world order that answers more to corporations and the political establishment than the needs of ordinary people. Real change is not going to come 'from the top'.

You might think that I am presenting a hopeless picture but, on the contrary, I am full of hope. Indeed I would go so far as to say that we live in a medium of hope, as a fish lives in water, even if we don't recognize it. I believe that we can affect the future for the better, but that if we want to reshape the world, we have to begin with ourselves, and we can. If we people are, collectively, causing such chaos in the biosphere, then we people have to change. And we can't expect others to alter their behavior and their outlook if we aren't prepared to do so ourselves. Moreover, if we want to prepare ourselves for an uncertain future, we also have to develop flexibility of mind, and the inner strength – I might use the old-fashioned word 'fortitude' – to deal with reverses and unexpected circumstances.

How can we learn the kind of skills required to prepare ourselves for an uncertain future, and to become more balanced in ourselves, and in the way we interact with others? Our educational system emphasizes the development of the intellect, with less concern for our emotional and physical natures. If we are going to be effective as people, and make any sort of transformation in our attitudes and actions, we can begin by trying to bring about a balance between our outer and inner lives, so that we can understand and account for the whole our experience as people – what we do, and who we are. Many groups and spiritual movements offer something along these lines, and it is really a matter of practice and knowhow. But it's not a quick fix. On the contrary, I can say with confidence is that it's a life-long endeavor. But the important thing is that it is possible to have a better and more effective balance in the way we live our lives, if we are prepared to work at it.

To maintain attention on our inner life is more difficult than being attentive to our outer lives. We all have obligations in our external life – to our work, to our studies, our families, the maintenance of our own bodies - which are hard to ignore. There is

not much room for argument when the alarm clock goes off in the morning and we have to get ready for work, go to a class, finish a paper, and so on. Most people fulfill these requirements of ordinary life more-or-less competently and, indeed, we consider it abnormal when we see someone who doesn't.

Our inner life has no such external pressure. Whether or not we maintain it is up to us, and it requires a repeated commitment to attend to what is happening within us. This is really a matter of our own conscience; it's between us and our own intention. Can we live, then, according to conscience, rather than in response to outside suggestions and pressures? And here I want to make clear what I mean by 'conscience'. I don't mean what is socially acceptable, or considered ethical by the conventions of the society in which we happen to find ourselves, however laudable we may find them. Instead I believe that we all have within us what we could call a 'faculty' for seeing what is right in any situation – inner or outer - and that this faculty can be developed. We could call it 'objective' conscience, in the sense that it is not determined by ethics of the society in which we live. At the same time, it is different from simply an inner whim, and it has a quite different taste.

This needn't be as lofty as it sounds. As an example, I can remember an occasion when I was driving too fast down a residential street in north London, and a man opened the door of his parked car in front of me, causing me to brake sharply and swerve around him. I stopped, and was about to yell at him – as he was about to shout at me - when I suddenly saw that I was completely in the wrong. In an instant my tone changed, and I found myself apologizing for scaring him, and asking him whether he was all right. The other man's attitude changed in response, and the whole situation was transformed from the all-too-common urban traffic shouting match into a positive exchange. This seeing what was required in that situation is a small example of what I call 'conscience' – the ability to see what is needed and to act on it, and one of its characteristics, as in this case, is that it's often a surprise.

My own conviction, based on my own experience and that of many others with whom I've worked, is that it is possible to bring conscience into our lives in a concrete way, even in the simplest example I have just described. It's not hard to

imagine that the world would be different if we people were able to live according to ‘objective’ conscience – the ability to see and act on what is needed - rather than simply from the conviction that the ethics and conventions of our own particular society are right, and preeminent. The dangers of the latter impulse are all too clear every time we read or watch the news. And conscience also has a part to play if we take seriously the idea that we have a responsibility to the future, as part of the ‘reciprocal maintenance of all that exists’.

Bringing about a balance between our inner and outer lives requires competence in both, and both can be developed side by side. In the Skills-for-Life course we are proposing for this summer, the aim is to learn some basic physical skills, such as gardening, cooking (for ourselves and others) woodworking, etc, while at the same time developing a few basic techniques for the understanding and development of our inner world. It involves working towards a harmony between our physical emotional and intellectual natures, and seeing that our motivation can come more from conscience than self-interest.

This requires know-how, but it begins with seeing how we really are, both in ourselves, and in our relationships with others. Skills-for-Life is a residential program that will ask participants to work together in practical projects, and to share observations of their inner life so that everyone learns together, and benefits from each other’s experience. The best way to see how we relate to each other in different situations is to try it! A two-week course can only be a beginning, but the aim is to show that it is possible to have a balance between our inner and outer experience. We can begin to see that there are ways of relating to each other so that we can work effectively together through a recognition of our common humanity – even with people we don’t particularly like. This can also help us to develop the ability to be flexible in our thinking about others, and about the problems that confront us. Learning to develop new practical skills – and not to be afraid to try them – is equally important. Dealing with such small challenges can foster the resilience and flexibility I mentioned earlier. It will enable us to respond positively to the greater difficulties that this century is likely to bring, and will help us to fulfill our part in the

‘reciprocal maintenance of all that exists’. It all comes back to what I said before, that changing the world mean changing ourselves.