

THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR PERSONALITIES AND LIVES

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I believe music has a unique role to play in the development of our personalities and lives.

While this is a personal belief, I have encountered many people in the world who share it. Furthermore, there is mounting evidence to support it. There is something about music that broadens, deepens, and enriches our personalities and lives, thereby making it of vital importance to people in all parts of the world regardless of what type of music they listen to or prefer.

This belief can be traced back to ancient times. The great Greek philosopher Plato was a strong believer in the unique role that music can play in our lives, especially at an early age. Not only did he say, “I would teach children music, physics, and philosophy, but most importantly music, for the patterns in music and all the arts are the keys to learning,” but also he believed that “musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten.” In his book *The Republic* Plato also said, “Music is a moral law. It gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm and gaiety to life and to everything.” In fact, this book is filled with references to the role that music can play in the development of people, their personalities, and their lives, as well as the development of societies, countries, and the ideal state.

Recognition of the unique role of music is not limited to Plato or to ancient times. Over the course of history, many individuals and institutions have recognized the importance of this role. In the nineteenth century, for instance, the American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, said, “music is the universal language of mankind,” and the Danish author, Hans Christian Andersen, said, “where words fail, music speaks.” In both cases, it was felt that music occupies a crucial position in people’s personality development and their lives because it possesses certain qualities that make it even more important than language and the language arts in some ways, one of the most essential art forms of all but seldom recognized as such because language is so commonplace.

Contemporary research is revealing exactly why it is that music plays such a unique role in our lives. Scientists involved in Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) have discovered through a great deal of scientific research that music provides “a total workout for the brain,” whereas most other activities provide “a partial workout for the brain.” Music performs this role by stimulating not only the brain and blood flow, but also the mind, body, senses, and all the other human faculties. It also reduces anxiety, high blood pressure, and pain, improves sleep, and enhances moods, motivation, mental alertness, and memory. As such, it is an ideal activity for seniors and people suffering from many different types of illnesses and diseases and not just children, teenagers, and adults generally.

Findings like this have been confirmed by the International Arts+Mind Lab at the Brain Science Institute at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Medicine, as well as by Isabelle Peretz at the University of Montreal and Robert Zatorre at McGill University, who created the International Laboratory for Brain, Music, and Sound Research (BRAMS) to “study music as a portal into the most complex aspects of human brain functions.”

And this is not all. Jonathan Burdette, a neuroradiologist at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center has conducted numerous studies of the effects of music on the brain. He concluded that, “It doesn’t matter if it’s Bach, the Beatles, Brad Paisley, or Bruno Mars. Your favorite music likely triggers a similar type of activity in your brain as other people’s favorites do in theirs. Music is primal. It affects all of us, but in very personal, unique ways. Your interaction with music is different than mine, but it’s still powerful.”

We have all been so touched and moved by music at times that we feel we have transcended the world and entered a very special place. This is because music brings an enormous amount of joy and happiness into our lives and moves us in profound ways that reach right into our hearts, souls, and being. Musicians are fully aware of this, which is why they create sounds, rhythms, melodies, and compositions that produce musical experiences that resonate strongly with our feelings, emotions, hopes, dreams, and aspirations, often in far-reaching, engaging, and mystical ways.

Just as Elizabeth Browning asked the question, “How do I love thee, let me count the ways?,” so a similar question can be asked about music. And the answer is the same: music affects our personalities and lives in countless ways. There is

music that satisfies our every mood, moment, and situation. It invigorates, stimulates, and motivates us, activates, agitates, and challenges us, soothes and relaxes us, inspires us, enables us to soar to great heights, is incredibly beautiful, gives us a sense of awe, wonder, and ecstasy, is nostalgic, helps us to express our feelings, emotions, love, and compassion, connects us with other people and makes it possible to share experiences, depicts specific places, acts as a gateway to cultures, enhances our awareness and appreciation of nature, and a great deal else. I have demonstrated this by providing examples in each of these areas taken from my own experiences in the western musical tradition and those of others. However, I believe this is true for all people and their musical traditions and experiences as well.

Take music that stimulates, motivates, and invigorates us. There is an incredible amount of music that does this, largely by getting us up and getting us going. This happens to me whenever I listen to trumpet voluntaries, especially those by John Stanley, Henry Purcell, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, Jeremiah Clarke, and Johann Friedrich Fasch. It also happens when I listen to Charles-Marie Widor's *Tocatta* from his Symphony No. 5, Jean Sibelius' *Finlandia*, Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance March No.1*, and the last movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, which is totally different than the first movement. Anytime I hear any one of these pieces, and others I might mention, I feel energized and want to tackle things that I have left undone for weeks, months, and possibly years.

Then there is music that activates, agitates, and challenges us. This music is often concerned with social issues and political concerns. Some of the best-known examples of this are the activist activities and musical works of American folk singers such as Woodie Guthrie, Pete Seeger, the Weavers, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul, and Mary, Johnny Cash, and Bruce Springsteen. Each of these musicians, and others, were involved in social and political causes that were designed to bring about change, especially during the Dirty Thirties, the Great Depression, the Vietnam war, the Civil Rights movement, and so forth. In the process, they created many popular songs, including *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*, *This Land Is Your Land*, *Blowin' in The Wind*, *If I Had a Hammer*, *We Shall Overcome*, *Born in the U.S.A.*, and others.

What makes the activist activities of musicians so important is the fact that they challenge existing ways of doing things, foster new relationships, patterns, and possibilities, bring about transformation and change, and are provocative, much like Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* did when it was first performed in Paris in 1913 and

for some time thereafter. Initiatives like this are needed more than ever in view of all the racial, social, and human injustices and inequalities in the world.

While many pieces of music stimulate, motivate, activate, and challenge us, others have a different effect. They soothe and relax us, especially when we are feeling uptight, distraught, or experiencing anxiety and apprehension. Whenever this happens to me, I usually listen to Rachmaninoff's *Second Piano Concerto* – as apparently many people do – and especially those remarkable chords at the very beginning of the first movement that set the stage for the entire composition. I am also soothed whenever I hear Emile von Sauer's *Cavatina* from his *Piano Concerto No. 1*, the second movement of Beethoven's *Fifth Piano Concerto* and *Violin Concerto*, Cécile Chaminade's *Concertino for Flute and Orchestra*, and *Dinner* from Morricone's *Lady Caliph Suite*. These pieces always calm me down rather than wind me up.

There is also music that inspires us. Music like this tends to be highly personal in nature, since what may inspire one person may not inspire another. However, music that inspires us is extremely important because it causes us to reach above and beyond ourselves in the search for the sublime. Personally, I am inspired whenever I hear the last movement of Saint-Saëns' *Organ Symphony* (Symphony No. 3), Wagner's Overture to *Tannhäuser*, and Ravel's orchestral version of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. This appears to be true for many other people. Here are a few comments posted on YouTube about this monumental work: "This was my introduction to classical music seventy years ago. It helped change the life of a Chicago slum kid to one of culture and success;" "Finishing my homework to the Great Gate of Kiev. I feel as if I have accomplished something important;" and "He based music on paintings. Very clever and very inspirational."

Music like this enables us to "soar to great heights" and "fly with the eagles" as they say. This is not confined to classical music. A great deal of popular music also does this and does it very well, such as *You Raise Me Up* and *Wind Beneath My Wings* - especially when sung by Josh Groban and Bette Midler respectively – as well as *Flying Free* by Don Besig, to cite only a few examples taken from many.

To this must be added music that is very beautiful. This is one of music's most powerful assets and cherished qualities. Like beauty in many other areas of life, music that is beautiful is in the eyes – or should I say the ears, minds, hearts, and souls – of the beholders. While some pieces of music are very beautiful from beginning to end, others are only beautiful in certain parts. This is because it is very

difficult to sustain beauty in music for a long time. This is why pieces that do this are usually quite short, such as Chopin's *Etude in A flat, Op. 25, No. 1* (Aeolian Harp), Bach's *Prelude No. 1*, Mascagni's *Intermezzo* from his opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Handel's *Minuet from Berenice*, and Morricone's *Gabriel's Oboe*.

In the western musical tradition, Chopin, Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Dvorak had a special gift for creating beautiful pieces of music, as well as beautiful melodies and sections in music. This is especially true for Chopin, who had a flair for creating captivating melodies, which are often buried in the middle of pieces such as the enchanting melodies in his *Fantaise-Improvisation in C sharp minor, Opus 66*, *Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor, Opus 31*, and *Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Opus 23*. One has to wait for some time to hear the exquisite melodies in these pieces, which is also true for the second movements of his first and second piano concertos.

Music that is very beautiful often gives rise to a sense of awe, wonder, and ecstasy, thereby occupying a powerful place in the development of our personalities and lives. Sacred and choral music often do this for people and do it very well, such as the sacred and choral music of the Renaissance and composers like Hildegarde von Bingen, Corelli, Gabrieli, Palestrina, Monteverdi, Striggio, and Tallis. Some of Wagner's preludes and overtures do this too, especially the ones to *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin*. Added to this would be Barber's *Agnus Dei*, Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus*, Dvorak's *Song to the Moon*, Fauré's *Cantique de Jean Racine*, Franck's *Panis Angelicus*, Mendelssohn's *Verleih Uns Frieden (Grant Us Peace)*, Bach's *Air on a G String*, and Mahler's *Adagietto* from his *Fifth Symphony*.

There is also music that is nostalgic. This is one of the most fascinating but frustrating things in music. This is because nostalgia - which comes in many diverse forms and is encountered in many different ways - is almost always "bitter-sweet." Not only does it produce fond memories that flood into the mind and memory, but also it is tinged with a certain amount of sadness and sorrow because these memories can never be repeated in real terms, regardless of how close they are or may seem. This is surely one of the most difficult things to come to grips with in personality development and in life, since it feels like you can actually reach out and relive these cherished moments from the past until reason and logic set in and remind us that these moments are gone forever and will never be experienced again in fact. Nevertheless, we constantly replay them in our minds and thoughts, as well as at concerts and celebrations because they are so precious to us.

There are countless songs that are nostalgic, such as *Time to Say Goodbye*, *Londonderry Air (Danny Boy)*, *Loch Lomond*, *Auld Lang Syne*, *Carrickfergus*, *The Last Rose of Summer*, *Shenandoah*, *Return to Sorrento*, *Goin' Home*, *Ladies in*

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Lavender, She's Called Nova Scotia, Ashokan Farewell, and many others. It is not coincidental that many of these songs are Scotch or Irish because Scotland and Ireland are filled with music of this type. This is probably because it was so difficult to eke out a living in these countries for such a long time and still is today for many people due to the inclement weather, tough terrains, geographical location, and isolation from the rest of Europe. Pieces like this always leave us hanging in a certain sense, since they are usually concerned with a family member, friend, loved one, group, or experience that may last forever in our minds and memories but will never be experienced again in reality.

One of the reasons for nostalgia in music is that it is filled with a great deal of emotion. This is equally true for music that helps us to express our feelings, love, gratitude, affection, and compassion. We have all had many experiences with music of this type.

This ability to express feelings, love, gratitude, affection, and compassion is evident in many pieces of music and every person has her or his favourites. A favourite of mine is *I'll Walk Beside You*. The words were written by Alan Murray and Edward F. Lockton many years ago and is sung with great tenderness by Bryn Terfel. This song was very popular during and after the Second World War when it was popularized by the great Irish tenor, John McCormick. When exquisite music is added to evocative words, the combination is unbeatable:

I'll walk beside you through the world today
While dreams and songs and flowers bless your way
I'll look into your eyes and hold your hand
I'll walk beside you through the golden land

I'll walk beside you through the world tonight
Beneath the starry skies ablaze with light
Within your heart love's tender words I'll hide
I'll walk beside you through the eventide

I'll walk beside you through the passing years
Through days of cloud and sunshine, joy and tears
And when the great call comes the sunset gleams
I'll walk beside you to the land of dreams.

This is a perfect introduction to music that connects us to other people and enables us to share experiences. I am thinking here of such well-known pieces as Charlie Chaplin's *Smile*, with memorable words by John Turner and Geoffrey Parsons that are epitomized in the first two lines - "smile, though your heart is aching, smile, even though it's breaking" - as well as *Can You Feel the Love Tonight* with music by Elton John and lyrics by Tim Rice. Then there is Louis Armstrong's rendition of *What a Wonderful World*, Handel's *Where're You Walk*, Jussi Björling and Robert Merrill's famous duet *Au Fond du Temple Saint* from Bizet's opera *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* (*The Pearlfishers*), and many others.

Thus far, we have been considering types and pieces of music that shape and affect our personalities and our lives in an internal sense. But there are also many types and pieces of music that do this in an external sense. Whereas the first type of music is concerned with "the self," the second is concerned with "the other." This enables us to get out of our own skin and into the world at large. Music that does this is often very revealing, since many composers have a knack for depicting people, events, experiences, stories, places, cultures, nature, and nature's diverse elements in very descriptive and highly revealing and compelling terms.

Take people, for instance. Included here in real and imagined terms would surely be Aaron Copland's *Billy the Kid* and *Lincoln Portrait*, Richard Strauss' *Don Juan*, *Macbeth*, and *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy*, Rodrigo's *Fantasia para un gentilhombre*, and many others.

Telemann's *Don Quixote Suite* also does this. This work is intriguing, not only because the music is so alluring, but also because Telemann depicts the hidalgo Alonso Quixano, his squire and peasant servant Sancho Panza, his worn-out horse Rosinante, and the love of his life Princess Dulcinea del Toboso in a very masterful way. You can almost see Quixano on his steed in full armor carrying his trusted lance and tilting at windmills, attempting to revive chivalry in the world, undertaking heroic deeds to impress his lady love, and trying to overcome the many injustices in the world as the music unfolds and the depictions enable us to conjure up scenes and images like this. The same descriptive ability is evident in some of Telemann's other music, such as *Tafelmusik* (*Music for the Table*), and *La Bourse* (*Stock Exchange Suite*). It is easy when listening to these pieces to see people sitting around a dinner table enjoying fine food and drink, as well as officials scurrying around a stock exchange floor buying and selling stocks and bonds. This same descriptive quality is evident in Wagner's *Overture to the Flying Dutchman*. It is easy to feel tossed

around at sea in the middle of a treacherous storm when listening to this piece, as well as to feel sick at our stomachs to a certain extent.

Paul Dukas' *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* should definitely be added to this list, especially as the brooms multiply and the apprentice tries frantically to mop up the water on the floor with the rapidly multiplying brooms in order to break the spell, as depicted most effectively in Walt Disney's animated film *Fantasia* produced in 1940 with Mickey Mouse as the sorcerer's apprentice. Then there is Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's memorable composition *Scheherazade*. It is based on a story from the Arabian Nights about the daughter of a vizier who tells Sultan Shahryer a different story every night for a thousand and one nights to stave off execution by the Sultan since she stops telling each story in the middle of the night. The Sultan is so anxious to hear the end of every story that he saves Scheherazade's life night after night. By the time she has exhausted all her stories, the Sultan is so deeply in love with her that he makes her his bride rather than executing her.

What is true for people, events, stories, and experiences is also true for places. A long list could be drawn up here, such as George Gershwin's *An American in Paris*, Ferde Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite*, Rodrigo's *Concierto Aranjuez* and *Concierto Andaluz*, and such songs as *New York, New York*, *Scarborough Fair*, *I Love Paris*, and many others. One composer who had a real penchant for depicting places in music was Albert Ketèlbey. Many of his compositions, such as *In a Monastery Garden*, *In a Persian Market*, *In a Chinese Temple Garden*, *In the Mystic Land of Egypt*, and *Bells Across the Meadows*, are excellent illustrations of this.

There are also many pieces of music that are symbolic of cultures or act as gateways to cultures. I am thinking here of Joseph Canteloube's *Songs of the Auvergne* that are representative of the culture of the Auvergne region in France, Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances* from *Prince Igor* that are symbolic of the cultures of the Kipchaks and Cumans, a nomadic Turkish people, Max Bruch's *Scottish Fantasy*, and Fritz Kreisler's *Tambourin Chinois*. While these pieces do not depict entire cultures, they do depict some of the most salient parts and revealing characteristics of these cultures, thereby making it possible to piece together an image of what these cultures might be like in the all-encompassing sense.

Nowhere is the capacity that music possesses for depicting many different things in the world more apparent than with respect to nature and nature's diverse elements. Not only is music of this type capable of broadening and deepening our knowledge, understanding, and awareness of nature and all things in nature very

considerably, but also there is an incredible amount to be learned from music of this type about the natural world and how important it is to preserve, protect, and revere it. It is amazing how many composers have been concerned with nature over the centuries, thereby creating a vast cornucopia of works that are concerned with the natural environment in all its grandeur, complexity, and diversity.

There are countless musical works that are concerned with nature and its elements in the western musical tradition alone, most notably the sun, moon, stars, sky, planets, landscapes, seascapes, morning, afternoon, evening, the seasons, lakes, rivers, forests, mountains, flowers, animals, and much more.

Think, for example, of the Sunrise Prelude in Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Henry Mancini and Johnny Mercer's *Moon River*, Holst's *The Planets*, Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6* (Pastoral Symphony), Arnold Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* (Transfigured Night), Benjamin Britten's *Four Sea Interludes*, Debussy's *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune* (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun), Edward Grieg's Morning Mood from his *Peer Gynt Suite*, Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, Wagner's *Forest Murmurs*, Alan Hovanes's *Symphony No. 2* (Mysterious Mountain), Léo Delibes *Flower Duet* from *Lakmé*, Johann Strauss II's *Roses from the South Waltz*, Rogers and Hammerstein's *Edelweiss*, and many others.

The seasons figure prominently in music of this type. Many composers have written music about spring, summer, fall, and winter, such as Haydn and Glazanov, especially after Vivaldi set the stage for this with his remarkable *The Four Seasons*. This piece conveys the sense of excitement and anticipation that exists at the very beginning of spring, the torrid heat and scorching sun of the summer, the beauty and melancholy of the fall with its exquisite colours, pungent aromas, and falling leaves, and the harshness of winter with ice, snow, and bone-chilling cold.

Like the seasons, water and rivers are also a favourite subject of composers. This is probably because water is one of the world's most precious assets and there would be no life on the planet without it; and rivers involve flow and movement that are key ingredients in personality development and the life process. Some of the best known examples of this are Handel's *Water Music*, Smetana's *The Moldau*, and Johann Strauss II's *The Blue Danube*. But many other musical works have been written about rivers, including the Yellow river in China, the Seine and Loire rivers in France, the Rhine river in Germany, the Nile in Egypt, the Ganges in India, the Amazon in Brazil, and the mighty Mississippi in the United States.

Animals are also a very important element in the works of many composers. A lengthy list could be created here, such as Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*, Ralph Vaughan Williams' *The Lark Ascending*, Stravinsky's *Firebird*, Bach's *Sheep May Safely Graze*, Schubert's *Trout Quintet*, Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite*, Rimsky-Korsakov *The Flight of the Bumble Bee*, and many others. Numerous composers have also had a fascination with birds, largely because birds, like composers, create music when they sing and chirp. As a result, many composers have used birds and bird calls in their music, most notably Janáček and *Le Chant des Oiseaux (Bird Calls)*, Handel and *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*, Respighi and *Gli Uccelli (The Birds)*, Olivier Messiaen and *Oiseaux Exotiques (Exotic Birds)*, Germaine Tailleferre and *Le Marchand d'oiseaux (Trader of Birds)*, and Mozart's music and funeral poem about his pet starling.

I could go on and on about this but the point has been made. Not only is there a great deal of music to suit our every mood, situation, and occasion, but also there is an incredible amount of music that enables us to go deeper and deeper into the self as well as learn more and more about the world. Indeed, there is very little in the world that is not connected to music or cannot be explained or exposed through music in one form or another.

Even if we went no further than this, it is apparent that music plays a powerful role in our personality development and our lives. In the process of perpetually expanding our involvement in music - all types of music and not just classical, popular, or folk music - it is possible to reap enormous benefits and rewards as lovers of music and hopefully participants in music, regardless of whether this means listening to music, playing a musical instrument, singing in a choir, or engaging in some other form of musical activity and music-making.

But this is by no means the end of the story. Music can also act as a springboard for transforming us in other ways, thereby enabling us to develop our personalities and lives on a much higher level of existence. Not only can music commence the process that is required to make us "whole people" – people who have achieved oneness and unity among all our different faculties - but also it can help us to live in harmony with other people, other cultures, other religions, other species, nature, the natural environment, and a great deal else. In doing so, it can make us complete and centered as well as altruistic, compassionate, sensitive, and humane. This enables us to experience more meaning, purpose, and spirituality in life, as well as enjoy all the qualities and capabilities that are needed to produce a full and fulfilling life.

Just as providing specific examples is helpful in understanding how music can broaden, deepen, and enrich our personalities and lives, so providing specific illustrations of people who have used music to achieve many outstanding things in life is equally helpful. While I can think of many people who have been able to do this, the person who stands out most in my mind in this respect is Albert Schweitzer.

Schweitzer was a student of music, a musician, and an organist long before he became a theologian, philosopher, humanitarian, and physician. Born in France in 1875, he studied music and took organ lessons in Mulhouse from 1885 to 1893 as well as learning to play the piano. He was especially knowledgeable about the life and musical works of Johann Sebastian Bach and even wrote a two-volume book about Bach and his musical achievements. During but largely later in life, he also studied theology, philosophy, and medicine and obtained degrees in theology and medicine from the University of Strasbourg.

In 1913, Schweitzer decided to leave his musical career and Europe behind him and go to Africa to create and develop the Albert Schweitzer Hospital in Lambaréné, now in Gabon in west central Africa, for the remainder of his life. He spent many decades there on a full-time basis treating thousands of patients with different types of illnesses and diseases. When he was no longer able to do this due to his age and health he alternated between Africa and Europe for the rest of his life. Interestingly, he had a piano created for him when he was there that was made specifically for the tropics which he played every day after lunch as well as on Sundays.

As a result of his intensive theological and philosophical studies and accomplishments, Schweitzer received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 for his personal and professional contributions and commitment to “reverence for life” and “the necessity of ethics and ethical behavior in society.” While he was criticized for being paternalistic towards Africans and the lack of proper sanitation in his hospital, he labored intensively for more than fifty years in Africa as a medical doctor and humanitarian dealing with sick people under extremely difficult conditions. When he was no longer able to do this, he fought against nuclear tests, testing, and weapons that he believed were contrary to his belief that all life is precious and that everything that advances life is good and everything that degrades life is bad.

By expanding and enriching life in virtually every direction and in every possible way, Schweitzer provides a valuable illustration of how our personalities and lives can be enriched and transformed - is “morphed” a better word? – by using

music as a springboard. This is confirmed in the following statement about what life and living can and should be all about when it is viewed from a cultural perspective according to Schweitzer:

The ripeness that our development must aim at is one which makes us simpler, more truthful, purer, more peace loving, meeker, kinder, more sympathetic... That is the process in which the soft iron of youthful idealism hardens into the steel of a full grown idealism which can never be lost.

Schweitzer is not the only person to use music as a springboard for transforming his personality and life and achieving great things in life. There are many others. It is also possible to use other art forms and activities for this purpose. To do so is to reap the full advantages and benefits of life in all its diverse forms and manifestations, as well as live life on a much higher plane of existence and level of consciousness. This may be needed more than ever in the world of the future, especially if we are to experience more spirituality, joy, happiness, and contentment in life.