

Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

August 2018

This month we welcome Mary Gergen, Taos Institute board member and a co-founder, as she shares thoughts on.....

Disponibility: Constructing A New Way of Living Well



By Mary Gergen, PhD

It's Monday, after a week of vacation, and I look at my calendar. August 6. Before me is a totally empty space. What a wonderful feeling this is. It's a day totally at my disposal. A day in which I can do anything I want (within the limits of my imagination and my pocket book). It is a day full of potentials, but no restraints. My freedom to be without the constraints of upcoming meetings, schedules, or pre-determined activities is priceless. Since it is 90 degrees outside, I can even decide to stay in my air conditioned study. I shall let the day unfold.

I became fully conscious of this delightful feeling through reading about the work of the French philosopher François Jullien. He wrote about a concept we might translate as "disponibility." As he theorized, such an orientation consists of "keeping the fan of possibilities entirely open – with no stiffening and nothing excluded – so as to respond fully to every request that is presented." As I began to see the world through this lens, I found new value in being without a program, being available for whatever happens. Further, I could see where this orientation is a direct challenge to a dominant American ideal that the good life is one that is organized, structured, well-considered, and future-oriented. In contrast, the disponible life is one that is present-oriented. Whatever is around the corner may give shape to the next hour or more. It is a way of being that is unrehearsed, unscheduled, and unplanned.

Summertime is a good time to practice this art. Vacations are times set aside from our normal routines, during which we are relieved of the typical burdens of our professions. Yet, practicing this disponible lifestyle is still required. Often we have commitments to our families and our friends. We have places we have rented, plans we have made, events we have scheduled or are expected to attend. We try to coordinate with those we are with, and show up on time. Yes, there may be days when we don't have plans or obligations. But then we may become anxious. Why don't I have anything I have to do? Maybe nobody cares about me. I have so much I really should do, but here I am wasting my time. It is not so easy simply to just float.

There is research support for floating. Last year in *Ageing & Sociology*, Taos Associates Diego Romaioli and Alberta Contarello wrote about the life styles of a group of older people in Italy; many of their participants emphasized the joys of a disponible life style. Each day one could choose what one wanted to do, given the weather, the invitations of friends, the intrigue of activities, and one's own sense of adventure. And these older people seemed to be finding their lives quite fulfilling. They just weren't organizing for tomorrow. So I ask myself, is this such a bad thing? Perhaps in doing so, they are feasting on the randomness of life and the opportunities that suddenly emerge.

Once I got the drift of this new idea, I challenged myself to imagine this form of life as applied to the post-vacation world. For example, how can an attitude of "disponibility" be applied to one's professional life? Could one imagine setting aside some time each week for unplanned activity, where one's agenda would be crossed off for several hours? What would it be to move freely and spontaneously without the constraints of a schedule or one's own internal clock? Could such time invite us into new fantasies, creative visions, or memories that might deepen and enrich the present? What unanticipated activities might unfold? A new word, constructing the world anew, sharpening sensitivities, inviting a refreshing form of life...ah, am I having a busy summer, or did I simply make myself disponible? What about you?