

# The Necessity for the Humanities in Psychology: Some thoughts on the work of J.H. van den Berg

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## Introduction

In an interview in 2008 for the special issue of *Janus Head* devoted to his work, J.H. van den Berg spoke these words as he reflected on his eight decades in psychology: “We need something else, a new grammar. In our modern era of successful science and technology—successful only for a certain range of problems—we lack the words to grasp and to understand the wonder of nature.”

Van den Berg’s call for a new grammar for psychology is especially important today in light of the fact of the current initiative in the APA to define psychological education in terms of a discourse rooted in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). The grammar of STEM fails to respond not only to the wonder of nature, it also leaves out of its discourse those aspects of psychological life that make us most essentially human. Indeed, these two consequences of a STEM psychology go

together because the world is, as van den Berg has noted, the home of our subjectivity.

Human subjectivity is not an interior mind space cut off from an exterior inanimate world, a Cartesian ghost in a machine. On the contrary, human subjectivity is mirrored in and through the world that embraces and contains us. It is reflected in the circumstances that surround us. It is there in the ways in which we build our buildings and construct our cities, design our economies and practice our politics. Indeed, human subjectivity is made visible in all those ways in which we construct the cultural artifacts that tell the great tales of a human life, the stories of birth and death, of love and loss, of community rituals, and sacred religious ceremonies. Phenomenology is the discourse of that subjectivity, the grammar of its structures, the flesh and bones of its presence.

Forty-seven years ago, when I first met van den Berg, his presentation of phenomenology was, and still is for me, a therapeutic moment. From the beginning I discovered the source of my disappointment with my early fascination with psychology. I discovered long before the current STEM initiative took a firmer hold of the discipline that psychology conceived and practiced within the grammar of science and technology left me homeless. I discovered that without the world as the home and habitat of our subjectivity we drift

along as orphans. And I also discovered that I felt less alone with him as a companion along the way. Van den Berg's psychology opened a path of homecoming.

In this paper I want to sketch out two ways in which van den Berg's psychology is a homecoming. One is through the artistry of his phenomenology, a phenomenology whose descriptive grammar is aesthetic and poetic. That grammar does open the wonder of nature. Reading van den Berg one recovers the mystery of the world. The other is through his unique and original amplification of phenomenology as metabletics. Before I do so, however, a word of caution.

In his remarks about the need for a new grammar for psychology, van den Berg is careful to note that psychology in the age of science and technology is successful for a certain range of problems. In this regard his psychology and phenomenology in general are not dismissive of the values of that grammar. The same is true for the STEM initiative. The necessity to question it does not concern its legitimacy. Rather the necessity to question it is rooted in its identification of its grammar, its ways of speaking about psychological life, with the truth of psychological life. The question is made necessary because of the unexamined faith it has about its discourse.

Phenomenology as Homecoming

Earlier I noted that I first met van den Berg forty-seven years ago. I was a graduate student in phenomenological psychology at Duquesne University, having followed my undergraduate teacher, Amedeo Giorgi, who in an introductory psychology class devoted two final lectures to phenomenology. Those two lectures changed my life. I switched majors from pre-med to psychology and two years later in 1964 chose to go to the new, radical, and unique program that had just begun there.

In 1965 van den Berg was a visiting professor and his lectures were inspiring. Meeting him as a young man was a bit intimidating because he was the embodiment for me of a man devoted not only to the love of learning, but also to the love of language and its exquisite use. There was no burdensome jargon in his words. There was just a beautifully evocative description of the world as that habitat of our subjectivity. Many years later I gave a lecture in which I drew upon his style to say that psychological discourse is at its best the use of words that are like a pointing finger that says, "Look, there it is!"

Phenomenology as a celebration of the simple 'thereness' of the world, recovered in wonder through the magic of words! I offer below three examples of this style of discourse that marks van den Berg's phenomenological psychology. Two are from van den Berg and one is from me. I offer examples

instead of an argument because something else that I learned from van den Berg is the necessity for stories and examples in practicing phenomenology. Stories and examples stir the depths of the heart before they touch the surface of mind.

### The wine bottle

In *A Different Existence* (1972) van den Berg tells the following story. I summarize it here from my account of it in my first book, *Psychological Life: From Science to Metaphor* (1982). That book was inspired by van den Berg's work.

The scene is a winter evening with the snow gently falling outside. In the street beyond his window a man hears the soft crunch of boots on the snow-covered pavements, and from this distance the warmth of his room has an inviting appeal. The room seems even more inviting in anticipation of an expected visit by an old friend. A fire burns brightly in the fireplace and beside it at a proper distance there stands a bottle of good wine recently purchased for the occasion. Awaiting his friend's arrival, the man sits down to write some letters. The phone rings. It is his friend

telling him that the weather will prevent his visit. Chatting for a moment, they arrange for another day before saying goodbye. Crossing to the window, the man pulls the curtain aside and looks out on the cold, damp snow which only shortly before reflected the warmth of a promised evening. But now the evening that was planned and expected has changed, and along with it so has the room. The evening now seems longer and emptier and the room somewhat more quiet and less comfortable than before. Throwing some logs on the fire to recover some of the warmth of the evening, the man picks up a book and begins to read. The evening passes slowly. Later, when he raises his head to think about a passage in the book that remains unclear, his eyes catch sight of the bottle of wine near the fire. At that moment he realizes once again that his friend will not come, and he returns to his reading. (p.30-40)

Commenting on this brief but evocative tale, van den Berg notes that it is at that moment that the wine bottle reflects the loneliness of the evening. The wine bottle not as an object in itself, but as a thing that assembles a world of experience, that gathers around itself the room for the

purpose of the evening and in so doing becomes a mirror that anchors, holds and reflects his experience. The loneliness is not inside the man. It is there in the bottle of wine, now uncorked and that will not be shared this night with a friend.

Phenomenology at its best! Simple and profound! A grammar of psychological life that says if you want to know a person's experience you have to understand the landscapes of his/her world.

### The elusive subtlety of the world

In the example just presented, the world as the home of our subjectivity presents itself in a direct fashion. The wine bottle is there, a thing that gathers the world. But the world that it gathers, the changes in the qualities of the room and the shifts in the rhythms of time, are less direct, more subtle, and less visible. Indeed the wine bottle becomes a thing with the power to gather a world. It becomes the visible expression of the man's loneliness because its visibility is supported by those invisible, elusive and subtle changes in the temporality of the room and its spatiality, in its change in temperature for example, which no thermometer could ever register, and indeed, a sense of

coldness not really affected by the extra logs thrown on the fire.

Van den Berg's style of phenomenology captures this chiasm of the visible and invisible, this crossing of the material and the psychological, that moment of transformation and dare we say magic, when psychological reality shows itself as a world and material reality becomes the subtle expression of that world. It is a magic that the poet practices. Indeed, if we return to the Greek roots of the word psychology, then the discipline as the logos of soul situates van den Berg's phenomenology as a poetics of the world's aesthetic displays. In this regard, van den Berg's phenomenology aligns with the poet John Keats who advises us to call the world the vale of soul making if we want to discover the uses of the world. And it discovers the uses of the world not as a resource for our use but as that home within which the human spirit dwells. It discovers or better said recovers and recollects the world in this way because phenomenology is a gnosis or way of knowing the world that is responsive to the logos or speaking of the psyche in and through the things of the world.

Responsive to the world's aesthetic displays, phenomenology is a responsible science, a science that is able-to-respond to the world, to be response-able, because it has first listened to and been ensorceled by the world's

displays, enchanted by its elusive and seductive epiphanies, charmed by the spell of its beauty, that beauty which Plato said awakens the soul. We might even dare to say here that van den Berg's phenomenology is a celebration of the numinous spirit of the world, an invitation to awaken to the mysteries and miracles at the heart of life.

In the far reaches of the Antarctic world where I traveled in November 2009, van den Berg was my companion. The DVD that I made of that trip, 'Inner Journeys in the Outer World (2009), is an experiment in a form of discourse designed to be responsive to the wonders of nature. As an ensemble piece that utilizes eighty-six images of that magical landscape, a voice over commentary, and music written especially for those images, it is an example of that way of knowing that I learned from van den Berg nearly half a century ago. That way of knowing the world and being in it is a responsive reply to the elusive subtlety of the world's numinous quality, which celebrates the aesthetic displays of that world. This example from van den Berg illustrates these themes.

In her book, *The Cabin at the Ditch*, the writer Carry van Bruggen describes a simple occasion in relation to the Jewish Sabbath. The little girl, who is the central character in this episode, notices the recurring ritual that takes place every Sabbath morning when the girl's mother removes the

daily red and black cloth from the table and puts in its place the gleaming white one. In this simple exchange of cloths the girl notices a profound change in her world. A certain 'It' happens but it is always just beyond her grasp. In *A Different Existence* (1972), van den Berg comments on this moment:

"As long as the black and red cloth remains on the table, there is nothing; mother comes, and there is nothing extraordinary about her, either. She takes away the black and red cloth; the bare table is old and full of scratches. Now the white cloth flutters in mother's hand, by the lamp, almost touching it; now it is lowered, it is on the table and-another miss. 'It' has come and no one has seen 'it' arrive. Mother suddenly has another face; and every chair and the cabinet and the stove-they all look different." (p.60-61)

This 'It' that happens and which the child notices is nothing. But this no-thing is not a void. It is not an emptiness. Rather, it is a subtle no-thing, a pregnant no-thing, a moment when the ordinary world is cracked open and its subtle reality breaks through. The change that the girl sees is there in the world, but no camera would capture it because it is not a fact to be measured anymore than it is just an idea in the girl's mind that is projected onto the

unchanging things. One has to have a different eye to be able to witness this epiphany. It is not the eye of single vision and Newton's sleep, from which the poet William Blake begs God to guard him. Rather, it is the eye of the heart, the eye of imagination that is tutored and educated by such practices as John Keats' negative capability and Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief, ways of being present to these 'It' moments that are a matter of the heart and which I described in a series of essays in *Ways of the Heart*. (2010) I would even suggest here as I did in that book that the education into this way of being present to the world is phenomenology's recovery of the central issue at the core of the ancient arts of alchemy, the tension and relation of spirit and matter, which resolves itself in the image as a third between fact and idea, and as the elusive, subtle reality where and when matter is inspired and spirit matters.

### The Microscope

We belong to ourselves because we belong to the world. In this next example I illustrate how I have taken up van den Berg's phenomenology as a practice of cultural therapeutics.

Many years ago when my oldest son was in the first grade his teacher who was in her first assignment was introducing the students to the

science of the solar system. She was enthusiastic but quite bound to the facts. So, when my son came home one afternoon and simply threw his paper on the table as he dashed outdoors to play, I saw that she had red lined his remarks about the earth's relation to the sun. In response to the question—'Does the earth move?'—he had checked 'yes' and 'no'. Inviting him on a walk I asked him to tell me about his answer. He said with all the innocent confidence of one who was 6 years old, that when he and I were walking the earth did not move. He went on to explain to me in a tone that suggested that everyone knew that the earth moved only if we took a rocket ship into space.

Of course, he was correct, but his answer flew in the face of the facts of science as his teacher was presenting them. I knew that what he was speaking about was science as a perspective, as a way of knowing the world and being in it, but from the point of view of science what is real and true is that the earth is a planet in motion. My son did not, of course, use this language of perspective. He was simply staying faithful to the fact that living as an astronaut on a planet in space is not

the same as living on the ground of earth as an embodied person. He had not yet been completely educated into this collective point of view, led out of himself into that place of mind that leaves the body behind. (Romanyshyn, 1989)

Children are wonderful educators and I realized that here was a challenge that I had to take. I had become interested in the theme of science as a perspective compared with how science was being taught in primary schools. Thus I offered to come to his class and his teacher happily accepted.

On the appointed day I came with a microscope and several prepared slides. My intention was not to challenge the validity of the facts of science. Rather, I wanted to demonstrate a difficult philosophical point: science was a perspective that required a specific attitude toward the world and the body. But how should I do that?

As I showed each slide I made a drama about the attitude necessary to see the world with a microscopic eye. Before I would bend down to look through the microscope I would wave and say 'goodbye'. Then I would pop up quickly and say, 'Oops! I forgot to close one eye', and then I would

wave again and repeat my goodbye. The final moment was a loud, amazed 'Wow' as I looked at the slides I had prepared.

Every child in that room wanted to see what was under the microscope, and as each took their place at the microscope they repeated the entire performance, culminating in their amazed 'wows'. In addition many of them made up stories about what they saw, the grain of pepper, for example, became a rock that they put on their hamburgers. Something magical had happened, that kind of magic that happens at the theater, that kind of magic that releases us from the tyranny of the 'real', that kind of magic that is the work of imagination. In addition, in their enthusiasm the students had learned that microscopic vision was a special way of being embodied in the world. They had learned this attitude by enacting it; they had built what they had learned into their bodies through the gestures of taking leave of their surroundings, repeating what Isaac Newton had done in 1666, when to study light he went into a dark room, cut a small hole in his window shade and placed between that portal and his singular, fixed eye a small prism through which, to the

dismay of the poet John Keats, he unwove the rainbow and reweave it as a spectrum. To be sure, another poet, Alexander Pope, praised Newton for this singular vision, when he said, 'Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night,/God said, "Let Newton be!" And all was light' (Nicolson, 1960, p. 154).

Both poets, of course, were right. In that moment when the rainbow became a spectrum something was gained and lost. Too often, however, we forget the loss and education becomes indoctrination. When in today's political climate in the U.S. when a law mandates no child is to be left behind, still—tested, measured, mapped and regulated—what is left behind is the imagination. In this context history is no longer a living reality and figures like Newton, Keats and Pope are no longer characters who live on in the imagination.

I had also come with scissors and a fresh slide, and when all the prepared ones were finished I asked for a volunteer who would allow me to snip a strand of hair. A girl with a flaming red mane of hair quickly raised her hand. Carefully, like Newton had cut that small hole in

his shade to admit only a ray of light, I cut one piece of that red hair and placed it on the slide. I repeated the earlier performance, but this time in place of the amazed 'wow' I ended with a puzzled look on my face. The absence of 'wow' caught their attention. Something was different. The mood in the room had changed. The atmosphere was palpably different.

I lingered for a moment, glancing back and forth a few times between the single strand of hair under the microscope and the wavy fullness of the girl's red hair. I lingered because the difference that I knew to be the case had to be felt in the moment. It had to be embodied by me as if I were experiencing this difference for the first time. So I waited in my state of enacted bewilderment. Then softly I asked my final question: 'Is there anyone who could think of something that could not be put and seen under a microscope?'

The question was not greeted with silence. On the contrary, there was almost unanimous and enthusiastic agreement that anything could be cut up and placed under the microscope. But I waited and repeated my question, wanting to illustrate now how science as a perspective had to

look at things separated from their living context. And then from the back of the room a hand was raised.

A blond haired girl with a soft lisp said that she knew something that could not be seen under a microscope. She paused—embarrassed?—and said, 'a smile'.

Of course, it is possible to apply the 'microscopic eye' to the human smile if one explains it as the contraction of the facial muscles. To do so, however, is to privilege what van den Berg calls the second structure of reality and to disregard the first structure of life as we live it in the world. *The Psychology of the Sickbed* (1966) is his eloquent defense of the primacy of the first structure of lived experience. In that small but deeply insightful book, he notes the ways in which the world mirrors the transformation of one's existence when one falls ill. One's illness can be diagnosed under a microscope but the meaning of being ill is to be found in the radical changes in the spatiality, temporality and embodiment of one's existence, as well as in the radical change in the relationship between oneself and others. When one falls ill one lives a different existence.

The story of the microscope and the smile is an example of van den Berg's careful and fruitful distinction

between the two orders of reality. It is also an example of how his phenomenology as a work of homecoming is a cultural therapeutics, which is a point I emphasized in an essay written many years ago for a Festschrift in honor of van den Berg's work.(1984) If we belong to ourselves because we belong to the world, then we come back to ourselves, come home to ourselves, when we recover beneath the second structure of explanation the first structure of embodied life as we live it within community of others in time on the way toward death.

### From Phenomenology to Metabletics

When one falls ill one lives a different existence. This theme of difference, which is so essential to Van den Berg's phenomenology, is carried over in his metabletics. Through a series of brilliant writings he has advanced the claim that people of an earlier historical time lived a different existence. The statement of this claim is succinctly stated in his groundbreaking book, *The Changing Nature of Man* (1975):

“The whole science of psychology is based on the assumption that man does not change. Whereas, in traditional psychology, the life of a previous generation is seen as a variation on a known

theme, the supposition that man does change leads to the thought that earlier generations lived a different sort of life, and that they were essentially different.” (p.7-8)

A fair treatment of his metabletics is beyond the scope of this essay. Some of the essays in the special edition of *Janus Head* (2008), however, provide a very recent overview of his metabletic work. To close my remarks, therefore, I can make only two points.

First, in his metabletic studies of, for example, the metabletics of matter (1968, 1977), the metabletics of the human body (1959, 1961), and the metabletics of God (1995), and in his phenomenology van den Berg has already offered a different discourse for a science of psychology that would not forget or ignore what make us most essentially human. In this regard, it is a discourse that is a badly needed alternative to the STEM initiative in psychology.

Second, although his work has been sadly neglected in psychology, the time might be more propitious for its renewal. For example, the recent symposium on his work in the bastion of APA psychology offers hope. Indeed, the papers from that symposium are now in press in the next issue of *The Humanistic Psychologist*. In addition, the presence of the *Journal of Metabletica: Inquiries into the Changing nature of Being-in-the-World* inspires the

additional hope that with the continuation of his work by other scholars translations of his many still unavailable works will be made available to American psychology.

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