The Psychology of Inner and Outer Space

Ruth M. Arstrong
North Park College

ABSTRACT: In popular psychology, inner space refers to thoughts, imagery, dreams, attitudes, and feelings, while outer space refers to the external environment. Such dichotomy is artificial and pernicious, leading to the proposition that spiritual growth occurs by expansion of inner space through exercise, transcendental meditation, self-hypnosis, the judicious use of drugs, and so on. Pastors alerted to this insidious psychology know that to separate existence from its milieu is both illogical and dangerous. The more insular the person, the more impersonal the society. Results can be tragic. Being an integrated inner person is to be a productive outer person. Otherwise the erosion of psychological and spiritual well-being is inevitable.

In the relationship between psychology and religion, pastoral psychology has understandably been congenial to the humanistic school of thought which emphasizes values, goals, self-worth, and the uniqueness of the individual. After all, humanistic psychologists take a hopeful view of the true quality of human nature, its creative potentialities and accomplishments. Also, in reacting against the machine model of man, they seem in some ways more directed toward philosophy and religion than toward the impersonal investigative methods of behaviorists.

As a result of this orientation, many humanistic psychologists have been associated with promoting a higher self-realization or actualization through expanding consciousness and acquiring awareness of inner being. Many people, especially young adults, have found this approach extremely attractive. Indeed, they have even coined a whole new space-age vocabulary in popular ("pop") psychology, with expressions such as "spacey," "spaced out," "life space," "personal space," and "emotional space" reflecting various humanistic concepts.

Now we have inner space and outer space, with inner space referring to one's thoughts, imagery, dreams, attitudes, and feelings, and outer space referring to the external environment. Spiritual growth presumably occurs by expansion of inner space.
However, such dichotomy unfortunately deludes us into regarding a person's inner and outer space as opposed entities. In the words of psychoanalyst Maria W. Piers of Chicago's Erikson Institute, this has become "most pernicious in our splitting of environment and individual, as if there ever had been a person outside of a cultural environment."

Even though this separation is artificial and unworkable, yet it persists, the result at least in part of the polarization that exists in today's psychology. The behavioristic system tends to avoid any discussion whatever of inner space while the humanistic way tends to wallow in it. Neither extreme is reasonable, but of the two, humanistic psychology is currently the most entangling and must be judged the greater culprit in exaggerating the split, and certainly is not spiritually edifying.

One particularly seductive proposition arising out of the psychohumanistic movement is that if outer space becomes too busy, oppressive, demanding, painful, or frustrating, one can simply plumb the depths of the unconscious for answers to all our problems; that it behooves each of us therefore to create as serene and detached an inner space as possible—through exotic exercises, transcendental meditation, self-hypnosis, the judicious use of drugs, or whatever—so one may retreat at will.

This is an insidious psychology, for any attempt to separate existence from its milieu, to extract a cognitive and emotional store from the outer world and then disclaim it is not only selfish and illogical, it is dangerous. It alienates the individual and undermines the culture. The more insular the person, the more depersonalized the society, and finally, the more arid the spirit.

It is true that retreat into inner space (with or without external aids) is a common defense mechanism in cases of both normal and neurotic anxiety, and that it may provide necessary and temporary reprieve from outside pressures. But to instruct anyone in coping techniques which make use of sustained withdrawal is to invite the way of psychosis. Schizophrenics, for example, feel genuinely detached from outer reality, but then suffer from an inner space which is acutely vulnerable and tormented.

It is not the psychotics, however, who concern us here, but rather the college educated, the pace-setters and dilettantes among us who have succumbed to the lure, and now find it fascinating and expedient to pretend that the only valid source of wisdom is in inner space, an assumption totally at variance with religious teaching. They de-