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## A SEARCH FOR HARMONIOUS LIFE: LIFE AS A PROJECT

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### Introduction: My perspective

We can all probably agree that there is no such thing as “**the**” search for a harmonious life; there are as many approaches as there are people. I believe, however, that there are searches that are more fruitful than others and that’s why we study philosophy, for example. What I am going to do today is to share a way, or a search I am familiar with, based on my experience as a Bulgaria-born artist and scholar and as a resident of the State of Washington. My main point is that the most powerful means for achieving harmony in our lives today are knowledge and the various forms of art. There is nothing new to this idea. It is my hope, however, that my dual background as a theoretician and practitioner, and as a person who has lived in two different political, economic and cultural environments, will allow me to present examples that will bring new ideas, thoughts or initiatives.

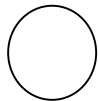
When I was a child in my native city, Sofia, neighborhood children and I played a game on the street called “Gradove i Durzhavi” [Cities and Countries]. I don’t remember the exact game-rules but I do remember that everyone had to have beforehand-drawn chalk-circles on the asphalt so when another kid tried to catch the rest of “the citizens” we ran like crazy to reach and jump inside our own circle, saying “Kushta!” “Kushta” in Bulgarian means “a house”—in this case, our protected place, our home, so “I am on MY territory, you can not bother me here!

It took some years of growing up and studying other languages, dance, literature, folklore, culture and philosophy, to start realizing how heavily overloaded by symbolic meanings and interpretations the circle is. I began noticing the circle as one’s-own protected place over and over again: early human beings’ home, a yurt, a moat around ancient villages and medieval castles. I began recognizing the circle as an entity, as “One”, as a completion... Mother earth, sun, fire, universe... Yin and yang in their harmonious unity of opposites (male and female, day and night, life and death, up and down, inhalation and exhalation, giving and receiving...)

Circles... Spheres... Endless and beginningless...

I was fascinated by myths and practices related to sun worship, by *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, i.e. the idea of life cycle, so thoughtfully analyzed by Mircea Eliade, Romanian-born historian of religion, by Jung’s archetypal approach... Analyses of these and additional readings and writings helped me understand the meaning of the circle in ritual dance and other ritual practices...

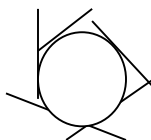
About twenty years ago one of my philosophy professors at St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia U started his lecture by drawing a small circle on the chalk board, like this:



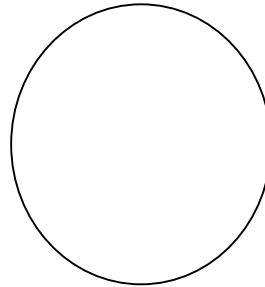
The full auditorium already knew that from here we could depart in many directions...

“Let’s imagine that this little circle is our consciousness.”

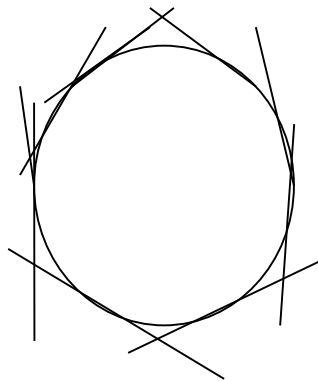
He roughly drew a few tangent lines along its circumference.



He then drew a bigger circle:



And drew tangent lines.



Then my professor began talking about the intellectual advantages and satisfaction before consciousness becoming larger, due to expanded knowledge; the growing opportunities to interact with fields that enrich and deepen our understanding.

I brought the circle to you, along with some of its symbolic interpretations, because I am going to use it as a main symbol in my talk (Here anyone who knows Chekhov's works will probably smile upon this sentence that resembles his famous phrase: "If the author introduces a shotgun at the beginning of its play, it is expected to produce a shot during the play...")

I plan to actually produce more than one shot with the hope that my symbol will help me in restricting my huge topic to a few main points, although each of them is as narrow as a dissertation topic.

### **Content:**

- Freedom of choice
- Harmony and harmonious
- What can we do and why do I care?

### **I. Freedom of Choice**

#### **A lesson from history**

Probably everyone in this auditorium has discovered writings, episodes or just sayings that simply stick in the mind. Plato was among those who gave these to me... (if I have to blame someone)... From

Plato's "Republic" I vividly remember parts concerning education, for instance, probably because I am a teacher. In a nutshell, youths must be exposed to subjects that develop high ethical and aesthetic values. Healthy seeds must be planted in their souls early in their life, so that over the years they will cultivate a capacity to recognize and search for life based on such criteria. Good education means integration of intellectual, artistic and physical education with special attention to music, although specific music... "The individual and the city are alike..."<sup>1</sup>

I read this in the early 1990s... In addition to studying literature and philosophy at St' Kliment Ohridski Sofia University, at that time I was also a choreography teacher in a school that specialized in music, dance and painting. I was already very concerned about the role of education and responsibilities of educators. I am talking about my teaching during a socio-politically "neither-nor" period when Bulgaria, along with other East-European, post-communist countries entered the painful process of political, economic and cultural transition.

Whatever one may say about freedom and one's personal choices, advantages and disadvantages of the former regime, I would argue from personal experience that, prior to 1989 there were limitations far beyond obvious censorship: foreign travel limitations across the Iron Curtain for those without party membership, restrictions on raising to higher positions in academia and any other government agency. Orwell's *1984* wasn't an exaggeration about life under a totalitarian regime... although the "Big Brother" came later to our "democratic" society as a boomerang, as a diabolic paradox, now dressed as a TV show.

Since I am talking here about education and state's needs, let me give you an example from the perspective "before-and after 1989".

Philosophy, logic, ethics and law were for decades part of Bulgarian high school obligatory curricula from ninth to eleventh grades. When I was a high school student in the 1980s, however, we didn't spend much time discussing philosophers. We struggled instead with Marxism-Leninism and the history of Bulgarian and the Soviet Union Communist Party's congresses. When 1989 arrived all of these ideological subjects were removed from high school and university curricula.

In early 1990s there was an eruption of publications that were unwelcomed before, or, if so, they were printed in Russian with a critical ideological forward. My generation and older people had all studied Russian plus another foreign language, which itself is nothing to complain about, and knowing Russian allowed us to read important works "between the lines" offered in these ideological forwards. You can only imagine that new kind of intellectual excitement: to read and discuss **openly** topics related to modernity, post-modernity, cultural theories, politics, etc.

### ***Philosophy in a 21<sup>st</sup> century high school***

And here I am a decade later, teaching psychology and logic, ethics and law, philosophy and philosophy of art to grades nine - twelve. Philosophy was then and still is meant to be taught to 11th graders. At the beginning of the school year most of my students didn't know what to expect from this discipline and some of the comments, spoken or flashing in the air, were: "What exactly is philosophy for? Philosophers are people who talk a lot and ask strange questions whose answer everybody knows or wouldn't even think to ask... This doesn't produce anything... Why should we study philosophy at all?"

"OK, let's see, the word "philosophy" comes from ancient Greek (as many others do): φιλία—love, striving for, aspiration for + σοφία—wisdom; φιλοσοφία means "Love for wisdom, or search for wisdom."

The mere realization that a philosopher is not necessarily a wise man but one who **looks for wisdom**, who raises questions about the surrounding world and tries to understand things beyond the visible, changed the air in the classroom; it gave my students the perspective that philosophy is not a subject necessarily or entirely for egg-headed specialists but for anyone driven by intellectual curiosity. The drive to understand oneself, or the meaning of life comes quite naturally after one realizes that life has meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> I am using Grube's translation (See Grube 1974: 85).

The textbook that I was using in 2002 was among others that had been newly introduced and approved by the Ministry of Education. Obviously it had nothing to do with the philosophical textbook of my own school years. Leading themes were now:

### **What is philosophy?**

In the Beginning was Doubt

What is Philosophy?

Classical Methods

Modern Methods

### **World**

Being

Nature, Mythos, Cosmos, Symbol

Nature, Universe and Home

The World of Culture – the Activities

The World of Culture – the Objects

God

### **Man**

Body and the Soul

Language

Existence

### **Man and Society**

Communal Man

Individual Man

### **Philosophy as Thought and Action**

Sophist and the Skeptic

Theoretician

Mystic Man and Romantic-Man

The Pragmatist

For people born into democratic societies a philosophy textbook like this is probably the most normal thing in the world. For me, however, the opportunity to discuss these topics in a classroom was a “dream come true.” My students were not aware of this. They were too young to know any other system; they took for granted the freedom to access information, to read, and discuss ideas from all over the world.

In an ideal state balance and harmony flow from man to the state and the other way around.... Yes, but only if one believes that one is in charge of choosing the conduct, the governance of one’s country, one who believes that his vote matters and therefore this interconnection flows in both directions. In my life I learned to **respect freedom**. Freedom may have many dimensions, may be interpreted differently, but not having *de facto* freedom to fully exercise one’s human rights, although having such rights *de jure*, is already a Restriction with capital R.

### **Classroom discussion on “Life as a Project”**

OK. Our former totalitarian regime is no longer a issue and we all have the freedom that everybody has by birth. We open the philosophy textbook and read: “Man was born free but is wrapped in chains...”, the famous quote by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. What kind of chains are these? Are the chains norms and rules of our society that we learned to respect, or\_\_\_? Or do we take the obstacles we face as an excuse for not trying to liberate ourselves from our “chains?” (“My situation was this and that, so I did not have any other choice...”) Maybe so. But if one reads Sartre this is never true; we always have choices, we are condemned

to be free (Sartre 1963)<sup>2</sup>. Shall I here understand that it is up to me to realize what depends on me, what not, and to accept it? There is an old Bulgarian proverb: “If we can’t do what we want, let’s want what we **can do**.” The message doesn’t differ much from the Aesop’s fable *The Fox and the Grapes*. Do you remember the fox’s comment after realizing that she cannot reach the grapes “They’re probably sour, anyway...”?

I will try to avoid oversimplification by discussing briefly topics that have been objects of long philosophical and theological discussions, ideological debates about which political system’s chains are heavier, and much more... So let me return to my high-school classroom.

I remember the electricity that topics like *Life as a Project* created in the air; even the very sleepy heads were up. Is one simply thrown into the world like a rock...? (We were reading an excerpt from Heidegger.) Or, is man a project to become, a project that is to be developed over time? Everyone is responsible for this development; one is free to make one’s own choices.

“But what if you were born in a poor country, lived in suburbia, in a damned, ugly, small apartment, your parents are working three jobs and there is never money enough? How can you study, travel and possibly think about your many choices?”

“Well, you can graduate with excellent scores, (this is up to you), apply for a grant, borrow money, educate yourself one way or another, in your country or somewhere in the world... You can work here or go... OR you can decide to keep complaining all your life that you were not given what was given to other people...”

“But...”

“But what?” Don’t you agree that you are, at least to a certain degree, in charge of your own life?

I had students who didn’t need a reminder like this – they were born knowing instantly that, metaphorically speaking, they will become “fathers” of themselves. Everyone, of course, has ones “ups” and “downs.” But it is important to have nearby a thoughtful book, an uplifting example, or a wiser person to give you a hand.

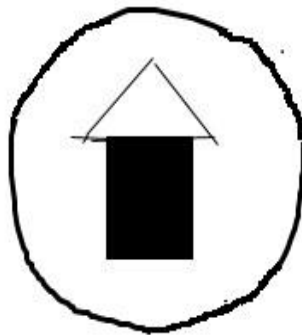
Let me now move to the concepts of harmony and harmonious that will help me to further discuss my topic.

## II. Harmony and Harmonious

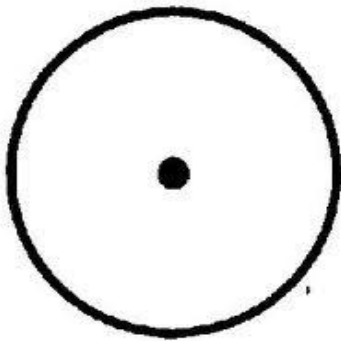
There is musical harmony (the art of using chords in music), harmony in colors and sculptures... I will not talk about these here but will attempt to investigate some other dimensions of harmony and the harmonious. Let me go back for a moment to my children’s game with my hand-drawn circle=my home.

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<sup>2</sup> For an introductory course on existentialism and meaning of life see Solomon 2000.



Without any philosophical preparation one would probably say that we, the children playing this game, were in harmonious relationships up to the point we respect the rules. But I am going to elaborate a bit on this image:



And I am going to apply a philosophical interpretation. I can now see myself as a little world, a “microcosmos”, that reflects and is a part of a bigger world—“macrocosmos”, or universe. Both micro and macrocosmos contain “cosmos” within, i.e. an orderly and harmonious system; a concept that is antithetical to the concept of chaos. It comes from the Greek term κόσμος [*kosmos*]—“order”, or “ornament”. Harmonia (Ἄρμονία), on its part, is a name of a Greek goddess, translated as an agreement, a concord (*Concordia* is the Roman counterpart).

My little world, apparently, also contains, or consists of an orderly and harmonious system... What kind of harmony within is this? It, I believe, is related to love.

There are thinkers who understand love at a level where one’s soul connects with God in a spiritual, mystical way. In this case the harmony will be a purely spiritual experience. (I wish that the fascinating book by Nikolay Berdyaev, *Eros and Personality*, was translated into English; it would bring such an insight into Russian mysticism, for example).

Most people, whether believing in God or not, look for harmony among people, that love and only love could possibly bring to one's life. No one can make oneself fall in love. (We all probably remember a famous quote from Shakespeare "Love runs away from those who run after it and jumps on the shoulders of those that want to escape from it...") We can't plan to fall in love; we may long for, look for, dream about finding "our" man or woman (looking for our other "half", if we recall Plato's *Symposium*...<sup>3</sup>). Whatever, we can't make it happen. It is a real blessing in our life to find our match. Different people fill differently the emptiness of the right man or woman in their life.

There are occult movements like White Brotherhood, for example, that combine Western and Eastern concepts and forms with both spiritual and physical experience.<sup>4</sup> The Bulgarian spiritual teacher, Peter Deunov, (Beinsa Douno, named by his students "Uchitelyat [The Master]", educated in theology and medicine in the United States at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, developed a physical expression of his teachings. His Panevritmia (Paneurhythmy), or pan-rhythm (everywhere penetrating rhythm, translated by him as "The Supreme Cosmic Rhythm"), consists of specific movements to specific music, performed by men and women moving together in concentric circles around the musicians. Movements represent the idea of worshipping Sun, Nature, principles like giving and receiving, thankfulness, and more. The idea of the relationships between spiritual and physical, the idea of harmony among man, God and nature, man and woman is interwoven into the entire choreography of 28 dance patterns.

There is a lot to be said to the physical expressions of ideas to specific music. Movement, the need for movement and its influence over human civilization and cultures have been deeply investigated and analyzed by anthropologists, dance ethnologists, philosophers and writers<sup>5</sup>. I don't know if dance and dancing could be defined as a "safety valve" for the society, as it is written by some scholars (Spencer 1985: 3)<sup>6</sup>, but I would argue that music and dance have been and still are among the most effective and beautiful ways of putting things into harmonious order.

### III. What Can We Do and Why Do I Care?

#### The cultural importance of art and the ethical, aesthetical and social experience through arts

A few years ago I read a student's essay on friendship that started with: "My best friend is my computer." The kid was 16 years old, overweight and what I was seeing during the school hours convinced me that what he wrote was very true. This case is clearly not uniquely Bulgarian...

I heard recently a statement by an American philosophy professor Rick Roderick that Marx was wrong in saying that "*Religion is opium of the people*" (Or opiate of the masses)<sup>7</sup>; today, he states, "**Opium** is the opium of the people..." (Roderick 1993). This case is clearly not uniquely American.

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<sup>3</sup> See Benardete 1986: 231-286.

<sup>4</sup> The Idea of Brotherhood: Nowadays, contemporary Christians ask what Christianity is, what kind of religion is it? And they are telling that Christianity is this, or that. No, no, God is Love, which has to join people to live in Love, Peace and Brotherhood. Whether they are kings or rulers and whatever their status is, these are things of secondary importance. All people should live in Love, brotherly; they should have mutual respect. That noble feeling of Brotherhood should penetrate within us, so when we meet a woman or a man, we should see in their face our sister or brother. If you are able to cultivate this feeling of Brotherhood, you will place mankind on a new footing. And then there won't be misunderstanding among us, and there will be a genuine striving." - <http://www.beinsadouno.org/>

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Malinowski 1944, Merleau-Ponty, 2006, and dance research publications.

<sup>6</sup> See also Rust 1969.

<sup>7</sup> This statement appears in Karl Marx' - "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" which appeared in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, as published in Paris on the 7 & 10 February 1844.

Every state and society has specific problems but as an open society we have many things in common. We all use computers and I even name mine, but the question is not about using technology. The group of “obsessed by technology” people and also the group of “spectators” rather than active participants is now becoming larger and larger. My comment here is particularly about the missing social experience through arts, and more precisely, music and dance, that are all part of our human nature. Most people today only watch other people singing, playing an instrument and dancing. Their voices are silent, their feet don’t move. There is a precious part in every human brain dedicated exclusively to performance of music. There is an unsatisfied and neglected need for movement to music and not as a physical release alone, but also as an artistic, spiritual and social experience. Music and dance, we all know, have a healing, therapeutic side as well; there is a sense for rhythm that is inside each of us by birth<sup>8</sup>. I haven’t have a more precious reward in my professional life than the one I had while putting on the stage children with mental disorders, who, dressed in traditional costumes, danced before their parents as a Christmas present in the year 2000.

I agree that the need for movement, and more precisely dance, is not the same for everyone. But this is not my point. There are people who understand that dancing goes far beyond the goal of fighting an overweight issue, while other people don’t. My point is that those who realize how powerful dance is for spiritual, psychological and physical well-being, must become more active, more insistent on inclusion of music and dance classes in school curricula, community center activities, etc.

### **Dance in School and as a Recreational Activity**

Dance in school is now a missing activity not only in our state but, as far I have seen, it is the same nationwide; during my dance teaching tours I’ve appeared in more than half of the American states. What I witnessed is that, if there are programs including dance at schools, these are an initiative by music teachers. Folk dance was a part of physical education at colleges and universities nationwide in the 1960s and 70s but not anymore. Last year in Texas I participated in a seminar of an organization named Pourparlair<sup>9</sup>, under the umbrella of the National Folk Organization. Its members are mostly music teachers from all over the States who meet every year to exchange dances from the world for every age group and suitable for school and community activities. Only I represented the State of Washington.

While mentioning my dance teaching tours I wish to add that I conducted a number of interviews and 400+ surveys for my anthropological dance research. I heard and witnessed many amateur dancers to whom the local dance community function as an extended family, bringing to them enjoyment of music, dance and friendship. Many have experienced personal losses and disappointments. Belonging to a group—playing music, singing and dancing--became a powerful therapeutic means to go through rough periods.

### **The Role of the Non-Profit Organizations**

Those who live in a city like Seattle are very fortunate to have many young people who either study or received their education here; this changes the air of the place itself, its look, its feeling and energy. Seattle is a great city that offers many cultural events and opportunities for artistic activities, including music and dance. But having big, great and prosperous universities or local traditions that involve music and dance is not the case everywhere; there are many, culturally empty little towns, right here in Washington state, where the only beautiful thing that could possibly happen to someone is to fall in love. Here initiatives from non-profit organizations like Humanities Organization, poets and writers’ societies, music, dance, art organizations, library activities, and others are crucial in bringing more perspectives to one’s life. They provide inspirations for exploration of new fields that will broaden and deepen our

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<sup>8</sup> See Chodorow 1991 on this topic.

<sup>9</sup> Website address provided in References.



knowledge and artistic experience.<sup>10</sup> Of course there are activities related to sports or yoga but my stress today is on the need for programs in humanities and arts.

As a fiber artist I am a member of Art Trails Southwest Washington in which one of the initiatives is to organize an annual Art Jamboree for children (a weekend with open studios in painting, felting, carving, dancing and more). Another activity is a summer art camp for children. There is an annual camp for adopted children (FRUA)<sup>11</sup> that includes dance activities... **These are not supported by the State!** And there are so many more opportunities for other projects that could be initiated by local communities...

### Why Do I Care?

“No Man is an Island”, if I recall John Donne’s famous line from his *Prayers and Meditations* (Simpson 1963: 243). The “small world”, as small as it is, is part of a “big world”, no matter how one interprets it.

America is a leading country, and as such, it has great responsibilities—everything that happens or doesn’t happen in the United States affects the rest of the world. If there is a high percentage of well-educated and cultured people in America—it matters; if not—it matters, too. It reflects the political governance that people choose or tolerate; the choice itself reflects back upon the entire life of the country and the individuals. Educated people won’t swallow everything that is spoken and disseminated by media and propaganda. In history, this was the reason that totalitarian regimes first beheaded their intelligentsia. “No person—no problem...” It meant more precisely NO intellectual who will raise inconvenient questions or act against the regime.

I care because I want to live in a harmonious and cultured society, no matter how idealistic this sounds. Knowledgeable, wiser people are more likely to choose proper state “guardians.” “Proper” for me means those who will work for noble causes. Dostoevski put in a sentence such cause that we all remember—“Beauty will save the world...” I believe this comprises some of the interpretations that we went through in this presentation, among which we explored harmony, nobility, morality, knowledge and more.<sup>12</sup>

Art to live is related to the understanding that to live is an art, an intellectual journey that involves development of one’s God-given talents and abilities. This begins with knowing ourselves, with answering questions like “What am I about?”, “What is life for?”

There is no discussion on this topic that ends with a period; the final punctuation is always a semicolon...

Thank you!

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<sup>10</sup> See Langer 1964 on importance of arts in education.

<sup>11</sup> Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoption ( <http://www.frua.org/>)

<sup>12</sup> While translating Plato’s *Symposium*, Professor Seth Benardete put the following note for “beautiful”: The world *beautiful* (*kalos*), which is distinct from *good* (*agathos*), also means fair, fine, and noble; and everything outstanding in body, mind or action can be so designated. What is lovable, either to sight or mind, is beautiful. It is the Greek term of what is moral, with the qualification that it designates what is beyond the sphere of obligation and duty, what one cannot expect everyone to do. It has a higher rank than just (The *Dialogues of Plato* 1986: 235). There is another concept, that unifies *beautiful* and *good*: *calos`cagatos* (*kalos k' agathos*), *καλοκαγαθία*—*καλός* ("beautiful") and *ἀγαθός* ("good" or "virtuous").

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**Music Samples:** *Ideal Creation. A Branch of Ideal Society*.

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