

Scepticism and Love – The Essential Mystical Counterpoint from John Wren-Lewis

Ruminating over some of the paradoxes raised in recent issues of the Newsletter, my mind went back to a paradox which confronted me personally about a decade ago, at the very time when this noble journal was being launched. The year was 1994 and I had the very odd experience of finding myself quoted in new books by two authors who both claimed me as an ally yet seemed to be in total disagreement with each other.

One of the books (Dying to Live: Science and the Near-Death Experience, 1993, by Susan Blackmore, PhD., a psychologist at the University of West of England who has often been quoted directly in the pages of Now*) was acclaimed by sceptics worldwide (including our own Philip Adams, who introduced me to her by satellite on his Late Night Live radio programme), for insisting that near-death experiences (NDEs) can be scientifically explained in terms of the physics and chemistry of the brain, without recourse to any paranormal or other-worldly concepts. For the same reason, many spiritual writers and some NDE researchers cold-shouldered the book. She quoted the story of my 1983 NDE and its resultant ten-year altered state of consciousness in support of her claim because I denied that the wonder of the experience itself or my subsequent equanimity about death has anything to do with belief that I have a soul which will live on in another world or be reincarnated in this one.

Yet it was my account of precisely the same experience, on Peter Couchman's TV show in 1992, that inspired Melbourne scientist/author Darryl Reanney to take a serious interest in NDEs (much to the wry amusement of his long-time friend Philip Adams). And in his book Music of the Mind: An Adventure into Consciousness he quotes my words, (along with those of other NDE accounts which he read later in the works of such researchers as Kenneth Ring, Raymond Moody, Margot Grey and Phyllis Atwater) in a passionate attempt to argue that consciousness transcends the workings of the physical brain. In his final chapter he explains that, for him, this was no mere academic exercise, but a personal search for meaning precipitated by a life-threatening illness (leukaemia) which befell him in 1993.

I knew nothing of this until later that year, when the book was already in press and he had become very ill indeed. Our personal acquaintance consisted of just a few phone conversations during his last days, but I felt a weird kind of intimacy between us. I heard from friends that before he died on February 5th, 1994 (just a few days before his book's publication) he'd been reading Ken Wilber's Grace and Grit which I'd recommended to him, and which tells the extraordinary story of Treya Wilber's NDE-like shift of consciousness prior to her death from cancer. And by my friend's account, Darryl eventually went "*into that good night*" with something like the same equanimity, total self-acceptance and relaxed anticipation of O.K.ness that Treya experienced.

Since it's clear from Darryl's book that he remained a controversialist to the end, I think I can do him best justice by trying to explain why I'm delighted to have been part of his search for meaning beyond scientific materialism, yet still feel no misgivings about being cited by Susan Blackmore in support of her doubts about the need for any paranormal, non-physical or other-worldly explanations for NDEs, as much because of her strict Buddhist practice as from any materialistic prejudice. (It's often forgotten that the founder of Buddhism listed speculation about other-worldly realities amongst the greatest obstacles to enlightenment.) An important part of her argument is that modern cognitive psychology undermines the ordinary personal perspective in very much the same way as Buddhism does, inasmuch as it demonstrates how the sense of separate personal selfhood is not the primary basis of human consciousness, as is commonly taken for granted both by popular opinion and by most schools of psychology.

The sense of self turns out to be a learned programme in the brain, just one of many programmes

(but by no means the only or the most basic one) whereby the organism relates to its environment – but it often causes a great deal of unnecessary suffering, even in ordinary psychological terms. Susan accordingly attributes the positive life-changes that follow most NDEs to the fact that that self-programme comes unstuck when the brain gets very near to complete closedown, so that when someone is resuscitated from the brink, she/he re-enters life with less self-concern, less anxiety about individual survival or advancement, and more ability to relate positively to the flow of life as a whole. The self-programme resumes with resuscitation, of course, but it no longer rules the roost. And that has indeed been my experience in a nutshell, which is why she quoted me in support of her view.

Moreover, precisely because I agree with her that the main significance of NDEs is liberation of consciousness from imprisonment within the illusion of separate selfhood, I'm quite happy to go along with her sceptical critique of NDE researchers and journalists who seize on these experiences as evidence that the separate personality programme can somehow exist apart from the brain and so survive the body's death. A main reason why her book has set the cat among so many pigeons in British and American NDE circles is that she blows the whistle on some of the most famous NDE stories often quoted to "prove" the personality's independence of the body. She's even extracted a shame-faced (but commendably honest) admission from a well-known American physician/author, that he made up a case (which others have often since quoted in good faith) about a woman born blind who was supposed to have "seen" colours accurately in the operating -theatre during a heart-operation NDE. Parapsychologists and transpersonalists must be constantly wary of this kind of misplaced enthusiasm, for it serves only to discredit truly rigorous research this area – research which is of the highest importance for human life in this world, irrespective of whether it does or does not, later on, yield real evidence of the paranormal.

Yet I think that Susan sells both Buddhism and NDEs short, not in her technical arguments as such, but by sticking to scientific materialist language which conveys the impression – no matter how much she denies any intention of doing so – that that mystical expressions like "God", "eternity", "immortal diamond", and so on, are only feelings, and somehow of less "reality" than biological concepts like "organism" and "environment". I'm prepared to agree with her that, from the physiologist's viewpoint experiences in which the personal self seems to leave the body are just brain-produced pictures, but such statements create an entirely false impression unless qualified by saying that brains and other physical things are also just pictures produced by the brain. In other words, physiology has its meaning only in terms of human life, not vice-versa, and in practical human life there is ultimately only consciousness, wherein feeling-statements are every bit as important as so-called factual ones, if not more so.

So, when cognitive psychologists reveal that the personal self is only a mental programme within the larger reality of life, the really honest thing for them to do would be to abandon impersonal language about organisms, environment and such like, and open themselves to transpersonal language. And this would mean considering absolutely seriously the fact that a large part of the human race has found it necessary, even in non-religious cultures, to use expressions like "underneath are the Everlasting Arms", or "The love that moves the sun and other stars", or "The many mansions or Eternity", in trying to do justice to their felt experience of life. NDEs and other mystical experiences would then be seen as vindications of humanity's age-old spiritual intuitions, made possible by relaxations of the self-programme, the reasons for which could be investigated in detail. And such transpersonal revaluation of science is what Darryl's book is about. Its core theme is summed up in his suggestion that alongside whatever statements astronomers, physicists, biologists and other scientists have to make about the universe, we should keep in mind that the word itself, universe, can also be read as "onesong".

(He seems, incidentally, to have coined this phrase himself, probably unaware that Dr Wayne Dyer uses the term, *Onesong*, in his book You'll See It When You Believe It, and Ann Faraday also assures me she's heard it before somewhere. Perhaps it's one of those phrases that's been around in the New Age atmosphere, but I doubt if Darryl often read such books. For my private Trivial Pursuits collection, I'd appreciate hearing from any reader who has a pre-Dyer origin for this expression.)

Kenneth Ring, featured on the cover of Darryl's book, describes him as a "scientist with a poet's gift and a mystic's heart", who "has fashioned an irresistibly compelling book on the nature of consciousness and evolution". Darryl was, by his own admission, a seeker trying to catch the tune of the One-Song from the latest findings in such sciences as quantum physics and astro-cosmology. In my judgement, both as a former scientist and a born-again mystic (since my NDE), this is a risky enterprise. Scientifically speaking even the most impressive contemporary theories can be subject to revision or overturning, and from the mystical standpoint, the human mind's powers of picture-making, even on the grandest scale, are bound to fall far short of the richness (including the sheer quirkiness) of Infinity.

Nonetheless, I find Darryl's book a fascinating insight into a remarkable mind at work. Even before his argument calls upon NDE evidence from myself and others, his fascinating analysis of consciousness in the light of quantum brain-physics makes the best technical description I've yet found of the process I experienced in my close encounter with death. He writes:

We are our knowing. What happens when we die is that we change the way we access consciousness: we cease to make a picture of the world, we begin to know the essence of the world.

That is how it was for me in 1983. I experienced the 'inside story' of myself and everything else, the One Consciousness of which we are all simply local focussings – and I've continued to experience this ever since. All my moment-by-moment pictures of the world emerge out of the Ground (or back-ground) of that One Consciousness. I've usually called it the Dazzling Dark of Infinity, but I'd have been very happy to have thought of One-Song. It defies verbal description, and even the greatest poetry, like Dante's "Love that moves the sun and other stars", is hopelessly inadequate for the feeling-quality of it. But it's certainly better than using terms like "space-time", or even saying nothing at all, for that 'No-thing' is ultimate aliveness, fuller than full, joy beyond joy, peace past understanding. (People who assert, looking down their spiritual noses, "... He who speaks does not know", forget that Lao Tzu who originally said this, went on to write the *Tao Te Ching*, which is no mean statement!)

I think NDEers whose brains translate that One Marvel of Non-Separation into pictures of meetings with long-lost loved ones (meetings notably lacking in the boring features of such loved ones in ordinary life!) are not deceived - unless they become attached to such pictures as purely personal experiences, which NDEers I know don't seem to have done, even when they've insisted on the total 'realness' of the meeting-experiences. I think that NDEers who have heavenly visions can relate to NDEers with very different visions because, unlike ordinary religious believers, their personal self-programme which produces the pictures comes to be taken far less seriously. What they know as real is the One Essence wherein we are all related, far more closely than in the very imperfect relationships of the personal self-world.

Darryl is clear that the main significance of NDEs is their transformative effects on consciousness rather than any possible evidence for personal survival. But I think even he sells the experience short, though in absolutely the opposite way to Susan. I would love to have had the chance to argue the point with him, since it's a similar problem I have with Kenneth Ring and with most transpersonal and popular New Age writers on the subject - namely, the obsession with the idea of creative evolution.

Specifically, Reanney and Ring maintain that we stand today on the brink of a new leap in planetary consciousness-evolution. They think this for many reasons, including the happenstance that medical progress has enabled increasing numbers of people to glimpse, through NDEs, a higher state of consciousness hitherto known only to a few great mystics who were exemplars for a new humanity. But for me, and I think for many other NDEers and mystics, the most essential and distinctive thing about mystical consciousness is that it's not high at all but utterly easy and natural, an equanimity "more ordinary than ordinary". My feeling is that it's really the common birthright of all humans at all times, something from which our species has been precluded by a kind of collective neurosis in the self-programme. I experience "God" or "Eternity" (or whatever you choose to call One Consciousness) as completely present in every grain of sand and every trivial event, quite as surely as in the grand sweep of galactic history. The full integrity of the One-Song is here and now for everyone in every moment, quite irrespective of whether the whole creation is headed towards some mighty Omega-climax or merely running to no particular goal.

Rupert Sheldrake thinks we need to take the creative evolutionary paradigm, which has transformed astro-physics, into biology and psychology. I think it's old hat, yesterday's story, a left-over from the personal self-programmes of societies given to empire-building and the work ethic. I think science needs a post-evolutionary paradigm, a play-paradigm which takes open-endedness really seriously, as expressed so marvelously in T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets which Darryl quotes near the end of his book:

Time past and time future

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

And because that One End is always present, I don't have to wait until I die to meet up with the songline called Darryl in some other-world, nor wait until all individual human songlines come together in some Omega Point. Darryl Reanney, who used to be separate, has now joined us all in the Great Space at the back of all our heads, and we can acknowledge him there by reading

even criticising his book, just as we can acknowledge Susan in the same way while she remains alive and well and living in England.

John Wren-Lewis

* Her essay Waking from the Meme Dream was published in Nowletter 45 in July 98

P.S. For an up-to-date study of the spiritual significance of near death experiences read Religion, Spirituality and the Near Death Experience by British scholar Mark Fox (Routledge 2002)

Dying to Live: Science and the Year-Death Experience, 1993, by Susan Blackmore (PhD) HarperCollins/ Grafton.

Music of the Mind: an Adventure into Consciousness, 1994, by Darryl Reanney (PhD) Hill of Content/Allen and Unwin.