

The Appearance of *Presencing* Individuals

by: Douglas Lockhart

I am learning to see. I do not know why it is, but everything penetrates more deeply within me and no longer stops at the place, where until now, it always used to finish. I possess an inner self of which I was ignorant. Everything now passes in thither. What happens there I know not.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge

The Veil of Illusion

Existence is a puzzle. If we're religious in the Christian sense, then that puzzle falls into a neat, manageable set of beliefs and observances. If non-religious, then into a pattern where we accept the vicissitudes of life and invest meaning in ourselves and in our fellow human beings. If a believer in some aspect of New Age philosophy, then we sail along as part of a mysterious "larger meaning" carrying multiple explanations and choices, and if an aimless *I don't give a damn about anything* type of person, then we simply struggle through as best we can. These categories, rough as they are, describe the majority of people living in the world's different cultures, and in that similarity lies our common humanity, our common search for truth, and our equally common disregard for truth.

The ultimate question facing all of us, of course, is this: Is there any such thing as a final, all-revealing truth, or is truth always bitty and piecemeal? Will science's "Theory of Everything" reveal a final truth that encapsulates and explains religion, or is it that religious experience holds within it the answer science refuses to accept? Or is there a halfway house in such matters? Might it be that science and religion will one day acknowledge each other's strengths and form a pact that allows the best of each to surface? Or will Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have their way at the expense of Paul Davies and other winners of the Templeton Prize? These are some of the questions facing us as we move erratically into the 21st century, and we should perhaps attempt to answer them speedily if we want to survive as a species.

The question of truth can of course be put another way: Is there a God, or are we humans alone in our quest for meaning? This question divides us as surely as gender does, and past attempts by theologians, philosophers and scientists to answer it have delivered up a mountain of material few of us will ever have the time, the patience, or even the inclination, to wade through. Yet the question remains, and the fact that it is probably a non-question, a question that no one can ultimately answer because one would almost have to be God to supply a satisfactory answer, does not deter us from trying to sneak up on this question by some other route. There are tantalising clues scattered in unexpected places, both religious and secular researchers sometimes feeling that they are on the verge of a breakthrough.

One such group of researchers is beavering away on behalf of the Westar Institute, an organization in the US dedicated to the task of spreading religious literacy in the world. Composed of over two hundred internationally respected Biblical scholars, philosophers and

historians of religion, Westar's Fellows are known as the "Jesus Seminar", and they have in their time galvanized religious opinion with some startling observations and pronouncements. Some co-religionists denounce them as heretics, others laud them for unflinchingly taking on the difficult questions and accepting the often difficult-to-accept answers they come up with. With such well-known figures as Don Cupitt, Bishop Shelby Spong, Lloyd Geering, Karen Armstrong and Karen King in their midst, this is a formidable troupe of scholars who have put their reputations on the line for the sake of religious ideas that are credible and useful in the modern world.

But there are also hundreds, if not thousands, of secular scholars equally intent on pursuing answers to the really hard questions arising in religion, science and philosophy. These scholars are involved in research projects to do with mind, body, emotion, perception, experience and the nature of the self, and regularly share their theories and discoveries in learned papers for the benefit of the whole academic community. As with Westar scholars, they are not afraid of a fight; they will and do attack one another's ideas in their search for the underlying truths of a reality that is proving itself daily to be even more complex than previously supposed. Self, other and world are not the straightforward targets of investigation they had at intervals hoped. They are curiously intertwined, one with the other, and are resisting attempts to be teased apart.

Strange as it may seem, some research projects in the secular area are concerned with definitions of God, mysticism, the soul, cosmic consciousness, meditation, death, morality, out-of-body experience, lucid dreaming, the paranormal and a whole gamut of other fascinating subjects of a religious or semi-religious nature. Hardly

anything is left out. These researchers are not, on the whole, prejudiced against religion; they consider its claims in the light of what is known about reality, and demand, rightly, that a language and methodology be created whereby such claims can be coherently verified and tested. Some say that is not possible, that religious experience does not lend itself to the harsh light of scientific or philosophical scrutiny. But what if science and philosophy prove themselves capable of empathy? What if some scientists and philosophers are also advanced meditators/contemplators capable of tracking their experiences, or the experiences of others, into the depths of consciousness? What if some philosophers, psychologists and physicists have encountered realms of experience difficult to explain by the usual yardstick of their own professions? What then? And if, as I've discovered, the term "spiritual" is often just a way of naming and controlling what we do not really understand, then what are the possibilities if religious scholars link up with their so-called secular brethren in the quest for an understanding of existence that fully acknowledges its astonishing depths?

The philosopher Don Cupitt is a case in point. Now retired from his post as Dean of Immanuel College, Cambridge, he manages to integrate religion, science and philosophy in a manner that challenges pet assumptions and enlightens not a little. And there are many others. The ongoing debate between science, religion and the humanities is, for instance, richly portrayed in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, a source I've consulted regularly while writing this group of essays, and in other technical journals of similar status. Taking on the important questions religion forces to the surface, these on-the-whole secular researchers give of their best in an attempt to unravel who we are, what we are, and why we are as we are, three

questions religion has long considered its special province. But that, as we shall see, is no longer the case: the doors of perception have been thrown open, and we have little alternative but to view reality through whichever door happens to confront us.

In the sleeve notes for *The Sea of Faith*, Don Cupitt's 1984 book dealing with the decline of supernatural religion, Matthew Arnold's metaphor of religious decline as the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the Sea of Faith is used by the publisher to perfectly capture Cupitt's notion that Christianity's dogmatic beliefs are worn out and in need of replacement. But with what? With "a spiritual path, an ethic, and a way of giving meaning to life," according to the same sleeve note. Religion is a human construction, so it should be practiced without dogma in alignment with "the twentieth century's bleak view of man's place in the universe." We are alone and must muster our own resources in the face of a universe that may, as Einstein posited, be unfriendly to our needs.

But Cupitt is not all doom and gloom; he suspects there may also be gains in the sense of "unexpected continuities."¹ But what exactly are "unexpected continuities", and how might they help? In Cupitt's terms the answer lies in a collective "sense of loss" that is only temporary; the "leap of faith" required of us now is that of embracing ambiguity and uncertainty in the sure knowledge that we will eventually answer the questions we currently cannot answer. Continuity of meaning will return if we can find the courage to hang in there. What was "given up will come back, though transformed and seen from a new viewpoint."²

For Cupitt, critical thinking should reject dogma; it should question and undermine fixed ideas. René Descartes' confidence should be our confidence. A comprehensive critique of tradition has freed us from

supernaturalisms and the headaches of theologians are well-deserved. But as Cupitt is quick to point out, theologians are attempting to straighten out the whole mess; they are busy fighting off the advances of philosophers and scientists while at the same time doing battle with the faithful over changes they know in their heart of hearts cannot any longer be avoided.³

Going Beyond Paradigm Shift

According to the historian Morris Berman, "cyclical recurrence of heresy implies the possibility of a different future."⁴ New futures in the sense of heretical breaks, ruptures and realignments with the past are necessary and unavoidable. They are, however, "rarely anticipated by those living at the time"; they surprise us in exactly the way the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' heretical agenda has surprised churchmen.⁵ Witness their concern over what they consider New Age heresies, or their astonishment over pronouncements made by scholars whose publications have progressively stripped the Gospel Jesus of his divinity. It is as if the very idea of Jesus being no more than a human being fulfilling a role in Jewish society has come out of nowhere, whereas in reality it has been gathering momentum for at least a hundred and fifty years. As with climate change and the possibility of a tipping point in weather patterns, so with ideas about Jesus and Christianity's deeper meanings. We are fast approaching a point of no return, a point of dramatic, irreversible change where our pet notions about Christianity and its founder will undergo a metamorphosis. But it isn't the ideas in themselves that are frightening churchmen. It is their shared sense that the tipping point has finally been reached, that the game of theological hide-and-seek is all but over. Cupitt puts it thus:

When we have fully accepted these ideas and have freed ourselves from nostalgia for a cosmic Father Christmas, then our faith can at last become fully human, existential, voluntary, pure, and free from superstition. To reach this goal is Christianity's destiny, now approaching.⁶

But alas, such changes to the way in which we perceive reality may not deliver us from the habit of re-entrenching ourselves in other limited and limiting paradigms. Escape from misconceptions about reality will certainly take place, and that will be valuable, but when all is said and done we will, as has happened numerous times in our history, find ourselves returning to the self-same questions in new guise. We will have shrugged off much that was holding us back from the clarity we crave, but that very clarity will again prove insufficient as we head deeper into our new future. We may very well find, as Morris Berman suggests in his seminal book *Coming to Our Senses*, that we have swapped "Descartes' clock for Von Neumann's computer" and failed to notice the similarity.⁷

Churchmen will nod their heads sagely at such thinking, but it applies as much to them as it does to any other professional group, and with a twist. Moves towards modernity in church doctrine will be viewed by conservative churchmen as destructive of Christianity's inner core, but that may not be the case. An updated theology that uses real history in place of tradition will certainly cancel out most, if not all, of Christianity's supernatural idiosyncrasies, but will it satisfy, as Cupitt undoubtedly thinks it will, our deep longing for, well, whatever it is we seem to have a deep longing for? Berman captures this point succinctly when he says, "far more important than finding a new paradigm is coming face to face with the immense yearning that

underlies the need for paradigm itself." Paradigm shifts in history are vital staging posts in our growth and development as human beings, but they can also be "gap-filling" devices that allow us to continue much as before. If really serious about change, then what we have to explore is not so much what is *in* a paradigm, but what we fear most, "the empty space or silence that exists between concepts and paradigms."⁸ The controversial Catholic contemplative Bernadette Roberts puts it this way:

The ideal ... is to begin our investigation with no prior assumptions, paradigms or belief systems regarding self and to allow the experiencing self to ultimately reveal its own eternal or non-eternal status, reveal its own origin and end. This way we avoid premature closure which only keeps the subject moving in an endless, pointless, self-perpetuating circle."⁹

Cupitt's notion that all we require is a paradigm shift to offset, in religious terms, our "sense of loss" with regard to faith, may not be sufficient in itself to bring about that intrinsic change in perspective we require to survive as a species. He himself is aware of this deficiency when he says: "All theories are merely man-made and provisional. Sooner or later the time will come when they will be found wanting."¹⁰ But Cupitt's hope is, I think, that this ongoing process of reasoned replacement will eventually deliver the goods, a process he links to religious wakening in the sense of "an inner path of renunciation and progressive purging of illusions."¹¹ It is critical thinking that will release us from our stupidity, and that is to do "in a modern way the kind of demolition job that was done by the prophets and teachers of old."¹²

Given the dangers we face in terms of climate and rampant religiosity, a new arrangement of symbols and signs attractive to our 21st century mentalities may not be enough to save us in the end. Our technical abilities will advance beyond our wildest dreams, as will our capacity to answer some of the most obdurate questions of our time, but our tendency to drift out of control even as we gasp at our own brilliance will also undoubtedly gather momentum, and that will distort and disable our most ambitious utopian hopes and desires for the future. The intrinsic change in perspective required for our survival as a species may not reside in swapping one set of ideas for another, but in confronting what it is in our makeup that endlessly hinders us in our search for truth and collective sanity. We are so clever, yet at the same time so dumb it is a wonder we've even made it this far.

Self-realization and Presence

Don Cupitt is perhaps not all that far behind Berman concerning the long-term relativity of ideas. He tells us that religion's earlier forms were "collectivist", whereas its newer forms are "more concerned with self-realization."¹³ Self-realization requires the "painted veil of illusion" to drop away, and that in turn requires from us a concerted effort to become more aware than we previously have been. But what does becoming "more aware" mean in real terms? Is it simply a matter of spotting anomalies in our reasoning, or in the reasoning of another, or of having a greater grasp of the sociology and psychology of our culture? Or is it to undergo change in the depths of our being to such an extent that we can, as Carl Jung suggested decades ago, step out of the historical process altogether? I doubt that anything as radical as that was in Cupitt's mind when he wrote these words, but there's no doubting Berman's take on this point when he tells us that it is only

“real presence, real bodily engagement with the world” that will free us from our inbuilt intellectual limitations.¹⁴ This strikes me as being well beyond “paradigm shift”; it is to articulate a premise that at first glance does not seem to make much sense, and at second glance causes us to feel decidedly uneasy. The human body as an instrument of change in its own right? What could such a directive possibly mean?

At the conclusion of *Jesus the Heretic*, my first book dealing with the origins and development of Christianity, I drew attention to Jacob Needleman, an American philosopher who helped clarify for me the heavily obscured spiritual premise of Christianity.¹⁵ Having identified perceptual processes not generally associated with the Christian message, Needleman spoke of an energy within the self that required the development of “attention” or, as he so carefully rendered it, *the force of attention*. Carrying his readers far beyond Christianity’s virtue-bound theories of the spiritual life, he offered a radically different interpretation of Christianity’s basic premise. At its most fundamental level, Christianity was not about “salvation”, “redemption” or “transcendence”, he said, it was about reconnecting us with our “somatic depths”, and through that enlivening experience with the creative energies of Being. As I had already happened upon a similarly oriented scheme of thinking in the writings of the Harley Street surgeon Kenneth Walker, I was immediately intrigued.¹⁶

As with Needleman, Walker homed in on “attention” and “awareness”, suggested that human beings were not properly conscious even when apparently fully conscious, and with a little help from the psychologist William James triggered off in me the disconcerting realisation that I too did not seem to be fully conscious most of the time. As this was

the same basic conclusion come to by Needleman in relation to what he perceived as “advanced monastic thinking”, I did a double take, for through a study of Christian heresy I had already reached the conclusion that there was much more to Christianity than most Christians realised. Reading this philosopher’s text with care (I had learned early on that it is one thing to agree with someone, but quite another to agree with them for same set of reasons), I found that we were in fact on the same track: our mutual premise stemmed from the experiential work associated with the relatively unknown Armenian thinker George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. Knowledge of Gurdjieff had arrived for Needleman via the writings of a certain Father Sylvan (an amazing story in itself), and for me via Kenneth Walker, whose 50s book carried the name “Gurdjieff” in its title. The enigmatic Mr. Gurdjieff, it seemed, was our mutual key, Christianity the lock into which this intricately cut key fitted.

As I completed my research for this essay dealing with Christianity’s dilemmas, I literally stumbled over Morris Berman’s 1990 Bantam edition of *Coming to Our Senses* on the floor of a local bookshop, and as I flicked through its pages I knew I had been favoured by the gods yet again. I should say immediately that I do not think for one second that this encounter was somehow arranged by Fate; it was simply a book that had fallen from a shelf and I just happened to be the person to pick it up. But certainly fortunate, there’s no doubting that; for as I discovered on reading this well-written, well-argued text, Berman had traversed much the same territory as myself, and his conclusion was all but identical to the one I was busy formulating.

According to Berman, we had come to deny, or ignore, the importance of our physicality. Our bodies had become no more than biological mechanisms to be prodded at and manipulated by medicos. It was as

simple as that; or as profound as that if you appreciated what had been going on century by century. Our physical experience of the world, embedded as it was in the larger culture, had been usurped. We had taken on the position of artificial intelligence advocates and accepted Douglas Hofstadter's opinion that dreams were no more than "confused brain patterns". We had accepted "cybernetic holism" and "systems-theory analysis" as the defining paradigm for the 21st century, and were in danger of succumbing to a new totalitarianism.¹⁷ And even more importantly, we had all but ceased to sense our bodies as an important source of information. The somatic level of experience, the still small voice of our physical existence had been dumbed down, its visceral voice all but silenced.

What surprised me about Berman's study was his mention of G.I. Gurdjieff *and* Jacob Needleman. Gurdjieff was referred to in the rather odd context of having "possibly" instructed Himmler's Jew-hating prodigy, Gregor Schwartz-Bostunitsch (formerly known as Grigorij Bostunic) in occult practices, whereas Needleman was hailed as the writer of *Lost Christianity*, a book dealing with the "bitter and recurrent struggle of heresy vs. orthodoxy." Later, however, Berman also linked Gurdjieff to Needleman, and this led him to speak of "presence" in the context of our physical engagement with the world."¹⁸ As "presence" or "presencing" had been the underlying theme of Walker's book, and Walker's whole approach to the mind/body problem was based, like Needleman's, on Gurdjieff's ideas, I knew we were heading into difficult territory. Knowledge of Gurdjieff's philosophical system had arrived for Morris Berman via Jacob Needleman, for Needleman via Father Sylvan, and for me via Kenneth Walker. Gurdjieff was therefore our mutual touchstone, his observations what had driven all four of us to explore what it meant to be a fully conscious human being

The Enigmatic Mr. Gurdjieff

G.I. Gurdjieff was, however, a man with an unusual history and a perplexing reputation. Born into the Greek quarter of Alexandropol, in Russian Armenia, in or around 1866,¹⁹ he had gone on to become a major influence in the lives of many prominent individuals. Viewed as a charlatan by others, or just plain crazy, he had nevertheless left an indelible mark on many of the most able minds of his time. In the sleeve note to a biographical study of Gurdjieff, James Moore describes him as a “potent myth (offering) sundry ill-assorted Gurdjieffs: heroic man of action; new Pythagoras, seeming charlatan; poet of surreal situations; white magician; black magician.”²⁰ Louis Pauwels follows suit in his not always flattering portrait of Gurdjieff by asking colourfully: “Was Gurdjieff the satanist who designed the inverted swastika for Hitler” or “a secret intelligence agent of the Tsar?” Then, more soberly, “Or was he ... painfully releasing the fabulous gifts locked up in our bodies?”²¹ Such questions have been asked for decades of those favouring Gurdjieff, and I suspect there is little hope in ever fully squaring this enigmatic character with the many apocryphal stories surrounding him.

As the West is culturally “Christian” in its orientation, so it is with Christianity and its doctrines that we have to deal when attempting to unravel our complex relationship to self, other and world. Cupitt, Needleman and Berman agree on this point. We are the product of a long and tortuous history during which Christianity, for good or ill, has helped shape our individual and collective psyche. Our fundamental ideas about the spiritual life stem from this close and sometimes disturbing relationship, and ignoring that relationship will not make it go away. And to further muddy the waters, heresy lies alongside

Christianity as an important partner in the evolution of human thought, but not quite in the way many might think. Heresy, Berman tells us, "is an attempt to restore body cognition to the centre of human consciousness."²² This is what Berman thinks the heretical movements in the history of the West were all about. The principal argument in heresy vs. orthodoxy was not about "doctrine", he tells us, it was about "experience". The very fact that this central issue got translated into debates about doctrine is proof positive that the heretics seldom got to speak for themselves. The winners wrote the history books. To my mind, Berman's explanation regarding heresy is probably the most insightful I've ever come across. In his final analysis, heresy is not about "ideas" or "beliefs," it is about the "cognitive, perceptual history of the West." The so-called heretics rejected the dominant culture's cerebral formulas for what they were, "formulistic," and in turn directed attention *back to the body as the seat of experience*.²³

This centuries-long avoidance of everything to do with the deep end of somatic experience has, in due course, had a disastrous effect on our view of physical experience. Caught up in the rarefied atmosphere of our intellectual processes (secular and religious), we have neglected, condemned or demonized the body as a potential threat to civilized life. Rene Descartes' declaration, "I think, therefore I am," has become the mantra of our commonsense approach, "self" no more than an offshoot of language and thought lodged firmly in our heads. Through Christianity's imagined manipulations of the body by sentient evil (the Devil), the physical has become God's antagonist, the conduit through which the conscious self can be subverted by evil forces. The human body is the Devil's chosen domain of action; it houses

"intermediate substances and transitional zones"²⁴ where heretics and witches can ply their craft of psychic deceit.

Self-presence

In Needleman's terms, the lost aspect of Christianity is our ability to sense ourselves as a presence, to consciously hold sense of self in place while engaged in everyday tasks. As a result of Christianity's evolution, however, this deep sensitivity towards the self as "presence" has been swapped for a set of rote beliefs about Jesus and God. And so we have a one-dimensional response to life and living, whereas it ought to be two-dimensional in the sense of *fully occupying the space in which we move and have our being*²⁵ What we're looking for, indeed hunting for, is not some great spiritual force outside of ourselves, some grand spiritual revelation to once and for all time silence our questioning minds, but a *sense of our own intrinsic worth*, a sense of being *fully awake and aware*. We are ourselves the missing element in our own existence puzzle; we have evaporated into thinking and doing and got lost among religious fears and philosophical wranglings.

That is Needleman's extraordinary insight: in spiritual terms we are not seeking the presence of God as such, but rather the ability to remember, or *re-member*, our own psychophysical presence moment by moment. That is the missing factor in our lives, in our prayers, in our contemplative or meditative moments, in our relationships and in much of our scholarship. We have lost sense of our psychophysical wholeness to such an extent that we have become strangers to ourselves and a danger to everyone around us. Not to mention the planet.

But we are of course still influenced by our bodies, and by the bodies of others. We still “know” one another at the primeval level of smell, taste and touch, by the way we move, or by tone of voice. We are still connected to our bodies, to the deep visceral experience of the body-self, but have become overly cautious in what we allow of this realm to surface. There is a deep-seated fear in us of the somatic level; the “subjective” level of mind and being is our enemy. Our bodies are an embarrassment; they remind us of the “gap” across which we have to communicate, not to mention the firmly entrenched “split” in our own body/mind relationship. And so we hold visceral reality at bay. God forbid that that reality – the reality of our separate bodily presence – should break into any given moment and disrupt our mental processes. This is of course a well-grounded fear, for unbeknownst to the conscious self there exists within us the sublimated body of the child, a core understanding of our undifferentiated level of being that we can’t quite get to grips with. But it’s there, and it does not go away.

But looping the self back into the self via “self-presence” is a bit like trying to see the back of one’s head without a strategically placed mirror – it puts a creative strain on the sensory system. Meeting psychological resistance, our tendency is to become “submerged” in thinking and doing, to choose the easier route and sink thankfully into streams and dreams of almost continuous conscious engagement. So great is the effort required to initiate self-presence that our surfacings are no more than momentary flashes. These glimpses of the somatic self as a “presence” are infrequent, infinitesimal in duration, counter-intuitive and seldom of any intensity. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger captures our problem in his 1945-1946 letter on “Humanism”. In relation to our sense of “Being” he says: “Being is the nearest to man. But this nearness remains furthest from him.”²⁶ We do,

however, sometimes break through when listening to great music, or poetry, or when grief-stricken, or when in physical pain. We are not altogether cut off from ourselves.

Being “present” to ourselves is not an easy thing to accomplish; it is downright difficult to sense ourselves as a presence as we go about our daily lives. We continually forget to physically re-*member* ourselves as a presence. We get caught up in doing and thinking and self-presence disappears into a miasma of jumbled thoughts and internalised arguments. As Guy Claxton points out in his intimate history of the unconscious, *The Wayward Mind*, we are undoubtedly conscious as we mumble our way across streets or drive our cars on what we term “automatic pilot”, but something is missing, and that “something” is our sense of ourselves *as* a self.²⁷ For Needleman, Walker and Berman, real spiritual experience is not about mystical ecstasy and wondrous visions, it is about openness to ordinary, everyday experience in the sense of being aware of our own psychophysical existence as we “think” and “do” our way through a day, hour or minute. And for Berman this means learning, or relearning, how to navigate the difficult territory of somatic experience and energy, a subject we will return to. Wittgenstein appears to have been of much the same opinion; his concern was to free the analytical mind from its frantic involvement with thoughts and reunite it with its estranged physical roots. Claxton homes in on this point and suggests that philosophers and schizophrenics “may be paralysed by the compulsive explorations of disembodied possibility.” Why so? Because they have lost their “common sense” and are apt to neglect intuition, feeling and sense of embodiment.²⁸

To help clarify these issues, Berman refers us to the Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann's argument that individual consciousness passes through the same stages as that of the human race, and that mythology is the map of that evolution. The first myths were creation myths: the Earth was in a submerged state and was brought forth from a watery chaos. The human ego (read "hero" in Berman's terms) became enmeshed in the archetypal territory of "journeys" and "conquests" where it did battle with unconscious forces and, if lucky, emerged victorious. The ancient myths were therefore about "emergence", the emergence of the "self" from the "not-self" (the so-called unconscious), and this process of emerging into ever greater awareness was/is far from complete. Morris Berman notes that the American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg posits six stages of moral reasoning ranging from "Piaget's 'moral realism' to a growing awareness of the role of the intentions of others to an emphasis on abstract principles of human rights and justice," and that Kohlberg and others hold these stages to be developmental and not merely cultural – individuals in every culture studied went through the same developmental stages.²⁹

The Fluctuating Self

There are, however, ongoing problems with this view; there are still technical things to sort out concerning self and its place in consciousness. We may have successfully emerged from the unconscious, but the idea of further emergence, never mind what actually does the emerging, is still under debate. According to Kenneth Walker, John Hughlings Jackson (founder of the British School of Neurology) and the much maligned philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, the notion that "self" was the *continuous form of personal*

awareness we assumed it to be was a misnomer. Noting anomalies, Jackson argued that consciousness was neither a fixed quantity nor quality, but something that underwent change moment by moment. Nietzsche was of the same opinion. Consciousness was not of fixed magnitude; it was "intermittent" in nature. Getting down to specifics, Nietzsche observed that because we believe ourselves to already possess consciousness, we give ourselves very little trouble to acquire it. We may not be quite as conscious as we think we are.

This was also Gurdjieff's observation: in his scheme we are all but oblivious to the fact that our conscious life is conducted mainly at an unconscious level. So taken up are we with mental and physical activity that there is seldom any attention left over for an experiential awareness of the self by the self. Being embedded in "thinking" and "doing", we disappear into a submerged conscious state, and enter a state of "conscious sleep", a state from which we only occasionally emerge or awaken.

What struck me as important about Nietzsche's observation was the idea that we do little to "acquire" greater consciousness; we just assume ourselves to possess it in full and continue on merrily. It does not occur to us that something is amiss, that we spend a great deal of time in a mumbling, cut-off state of consciousness within which our empathic natures have difficulty in operating. We have, as it were, stepped into a crack in time and space where only the object of attention rules, a subjective domain where the self-aware subject of consciousness resembles drifting smoke. In this sense "self" is not of fixed duration, an opinion backed now by much recent research. There is, we are told by numerous professionals, no fixed form of self at the centre of conscious awareness. Consciousness goes through continuous fluctuations, and as such cannot sustain a permanent "I"

structure, only a fleeting or intermittent one. Continuity of self is therefore an illusion, a chimera, a concept without substance in psychological reality. There is an "I-structure", but it is composed of a "procession of I-moments" cleverly synthesized into what appears to be a singularity. Identity we certainly have, but it is no more than a backgrounding haze conjured out of past memories. Everything is in a state of flux, a state of coming and going, a state of existing and not existing. Or, as the philosopher David Hume put it, mind or self is believed to be a unity only because of the "felt smoothness of the transition which imagination effects between point and point." Our idea of having a continuous self is pure supposition.

Picking up on this idea in a more positive and helpful manner, the Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann observed that the logical statement of identity – "I am I" – is in fact a tremendous achievement because it is an act "whereby an ego is posited and the personality identified with that ego – however fallacious that identification may later prove to be".³⁰ Out of this process comes a "self-orienting" consciousness, and it is our capacity for self-orientation that makes all the difference. But note Neumann's qualification: *however fallacious that identification may later prove to be.*

Here then is much the same observation as that made by Nietzsche, Jackson, Hume, and countless others, whereas in Neumann's terms the disconcerting discovery that our idea of being a self may be an illusion is turned from a negative into positive. The illusion of having a self, of being an individual entity, of having a personality constellated around an "I-structure", becomes an achievement of which we need not be ashamed. The appearance in consciousness of a "self-orienting principle" was an evolutionary event of major psychological

importance, an event without which we would lack the internal focus to exist and function as self-aware biological systems. The psychoanalyst David Black concurs: "Where there is no subject, nothing is of any importance."³¹ Bernadette Roberts follows suit:

self or consciousness is not an entity or a being; it is not an individual person, a soul or a spirit temporarily dwelling in the body; nor is it divine, eternal or immortal. Self or consciousness is, however, the experience of all of the above – entity, being, soul, spirit and so on. Self or consciousness is a specific, unique experience or set of experiences. Take away self, and all its experiences go with it.³²

If Berman and Needleman and Walker are correct in their conclusion, the appearance of "presencing individuals" in our societies may herald the next significant development in our evolution as a species. Our bodies may seem to be no more than vehicles within which our minds travel like passengers, but they may be much more than that. They may in fact be the means by which we can free ourselves from the natural limitations of our struggling intellects.

REFERENCES AND NOTES:

- 1) Cupitt, Don, *The Sea of Faith/Christianity in Change*, British Broadcasting Corporation, 1984, p 7.
- 2) Ibid, p 273. [1] [SEP]
- 3) Ibid, 9-10. [1] [SEP]
- 4) Berman, Morris, *Coming to Our Senses*, Bantam Books, New York, 1990, p 137. [1] [SEP]
- 5) Ibid, p 138. [1] [SEP]
- 6) Cupitt, Don, *The Sea of Faith*, (as above) p 271. [1] [SEP]
- 7) Berman, Morris, *Coming to Our Senses*, (as above) p 305. [1] [SEP]

- 8) Ibid, 307.
- 9) Roberts, Bernadette, *What is Self? A Study of the Spiritual Journey in Terms of Consciousness*, Sentient Publications, LLC., 2005, p 54.
- 10) Berman, Morris, *Coming to Our Senses*, (as above) p 9.
- 11) Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, (as above) p 250.
- 12) Ibid.
- 14) Berman, Morris, *Coming to Our Senses*, (as above) p 306.
- 15) Lockhart, Douglas, *Jesus the Heretic*, Element Books, Wiltshire, England, 1997, p 10.
- 16) Walker, Kenneth, *A Study of Gurdjieff's Teachings*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1957, p 12.
- 17) Berman, Morris, *Coming to Our Senses*, (as above) p 305. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger believed Western man had become so mechanical in his attitudes that he had forgotten what it felt like to exist as a human being. Reflection on existence as an experience in its own right had all but disappeared and been replaced with the metallic sheen of technological thinking. As a result we were becoming progressively more nihilistic in our attitudes.
- 18) Ibid, 306.
- 19) Moore, James, *Gurdjieff, The Anatomy of a Myth: A Biography*, Element Books, Shaftesbury, England 1991, p 9.
- 20) Ibid, (flyleaf)
- 21) Pauwels, Louis, *Gurdjieff*, Times Press, Ltd., Isle of Man, 1964. (flyleaf)
- 22) Berman, Morris, *Coming to Our Senses*, (as above) 138.