



The NOWletter first appeared in 1993 as a direct result of Douglas Harding's visit to Australia in 1991. Douglas's visit to Sydney involved a lecture one Friday night followed by a weekend workshop. On both occasions he was introduced by John Wren-Lewis who made a list of people interested in some form of ongoing involvement. John was an expert in delegation and, after Douglas left Sydney, handed me the list with a "Over to you, please carry on!".

We started with regular meetings at the Wayside Chapel. Attendance gradually faded away but we kept the movement going as Dialogue meetings, based on David Bohm's ideas about collective enquiry, at our home in Chatswood until 2023. The original meetings were backed up from 1993 with the monthly issue of this newsletter based on contributions from people who attended the meetings and others living too far away for regular attendance.

The NOWletter depends on input from the membership so please let us have your views when the spirit moves. This issue No. 247, involves a chat between myself and CoPilot. This is a first time for AI participation in our affairs and I must say I'm impressed. I have not edited the CoPilot entries in any way and the bold text is the CoPilot emphasis.

The Rediscovery of the Obvious.

Douglas Harding sub-titled his book 'On Having No Head' *Zen and the rediscovery of the obvious*. The obvious indicating that what is really our condition, but customarily overlooked, is a perspective that includes but is not limited to the 'self'. Krishnamurti, and others, point to this aspect of our experience by saying "the observer is the observed". Harding developed a number of experiments to demonstrate that this is, in fact, always the case even though it is generally overlooked. Many find the experiments do not 'open the door'. This is my attempt to explain why I have found his work so compelling. The experiments are described on the Headless Way website at:
<https://www.headless.org/experiments-home.htm>

So what are the consequences of the headless discovery? Experiences are likely to differ and the responses, influenced by prior interests and experiences, will vary. The differences will be relatively insignificant in comparison with the experience revealed by these simple experiments. So, what I have attempted in this issue is record their application to the work, teaching, and messages of people I have found helpful.

There are many many poetic examples of the wider view and presumably the value of poetry in this connection is that it can give us a sense of what is involved without relying on literal explanation, it is asking us to engage with and as the immediate occasion rather than filtering our seeing, hearing and feeling through the assumed observer-self. The Wider View selection in the September 2021 Issue of the NOWletter included a selection of poems and quotations which I think capture the sense of what is involved. The collection can be seen at the link below and I have included some examples in this issue.

<https://www.capacitie.org/content/now/Now231.pdf>

Emily Dickinson - Poem 959

A loss of something ever felt I —
The first that I could recollect
Bereft I was — of what I knew not
Too young that any should suspect

A Mourner walked among the children
I notwithstanding went about
As one bemoaning a Dominion
Itself the only Prince cast out —

Elder, Today, a session wiser
And fainter, too, as Wiseness is —
I find myself still softly searching
For my Delinquent Palaces.

And a Suspicion, like a Finger
Touches my Forehead now and then
That I am looking oppositely
For the site of the Kingdom of Heaven —

Whilst there is nothing supernatural about it there is something that can be described as excessively natural, and that is the way we become entrapped in our knowledge and explanations of what is going on to the complete exclusion of our experiencing. There is an interesting comparison to be made between the final verse and the pointing finger experiment.

Sylvia Plath - From her poem Black Rook in Rainy Weather

A certain minor light may still
 Leap incandescent
 Out Of kitchen table or chair
 As if a celestial burning took Possession
 Of the most obtuse Objects now and then—
 Thus hallowing an interval
 Otherwise inconsequent
 By bestowing largesse, honour,
 One might say love.

Delmore Schwartz in “Seurat’s Sunday Afternoon along the Seine

If you look long enough at anything
 It will become extremely interesting;
 If you look very long at anything
 It will become rich, manifold, fascinating:
 If you can look at anything for long enough,
 You will rejoice in the miracle of love,
 You will possess and be blessed by the marvellous blinding radiance of love, you will be
 radiance.

Goethe — “There is a delicate empiricism which makes itself utterly identical with the object, thereby becoming true theory... The ultimate goal would be to grasp that everything in the realm of fact is already theory... Let us not seek for something beyond the phenomena – they themselves are the theory” (Goethe, 1988, p.307, quoted in Brady, 1998, p.98).

Two quotations - William Blake

To see a world in a Grain of Sand,
 And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
 And eternity in an hour.

“If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.”
William Blake

Alan Gould writes: Traherne was a visionary Anglican. Judith Wright was a spiritually conflicted secular intellect. Yet the work of both, their very sense of themselves on the planet, are in accord with Traherne's discovery of self in his poem “Wonder”: I felt a vigor in my sense That was all spirit.

Reading Thomas Traherne – a poem by Judith Wright

Can I then lose myself,
and losing find one word
that, in the face of what you were,
needs to be said or heard? –
Or speak of what has come
to your sad race
that to your clear rejoicing we turn
with such a face?
With such a face, Traherne,
as might make dumb
any but you, the man who knew
how simply truth may come:
who saw the depth of darkness
shake, part and move,
and from death' s centre the light' s ladder
go up from love to Love.

Alan speaking. I had read this poem a number of times without picking up Judith Wright's distinction between lower and upper case Love. I finally spotted it in reading Alan Gould's article on Traherne, The Poet of Sudden Cloudbreak.

We find this suspension of explanation and its replacement with direct experience in many traditions East and West and in Australia we find it in indigenous philosophy where it is described by our First Nations people as the dreaming. I recently came across the following note on the ‘Dreaming’ on an essay by Ross Naidoo in a the April/May issue of Pphilosophy Now entitled *Australian Indigenous Philosophy*

.....Most importantly for an Indigenous metaphysics, the Dreaming is what the anthropologist A.P. Elkin in 1969 called “the ever-present, unseen ground of being, of existence” (for more, see Australian Aboriginal Philosophy, Max Charlesworth, 2000). But Indigenous thinking is not a ‘self-conscious detachment towards myth’, as Charlesworth

puts it. Rather, it is the conscious placing of one's guiding spirit over the material essentials. Through this, 'being' is developed. Perhaps the concept that most captures the sense of being in 'Every-When and Where' from a Western philosophical perspective is perhaps that of Martin Heidegger's Dasein: the idea of an ever-present human consciousness that is 'thrown into', rather than choosing, its world. Yet in Indigenous thinking, ritual, meaning, and purpose are all interlinked in what's important to one's being, to the sense of self that precedes our physical, intellectual and emotional selves, and to the pre-source of all creation. All physical and non-physical support comes from the original source of the Dreaming. The Dream perpetuates the 'Every-When and Where' being and its here and now manifestation experienced by both the spiritual and physical self.

In reading this article I was reminded that there are equivalent approaches in my own tradition and here we could quote Shakespeare:

Sweet are the uses of adversity; Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous, Wears yet a precious jewel in his head; And this our life, exempt from public haunt, Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stones, and good in everything. I would not change it. ⁱⁱ

In looking further back than Shakespeare we find it in druidic teachings where it appears under the name of Awen, the word understood as "flowing spirit"—a divine current that awakens creativity and connects one to nature and the cosmos.

I am drawing on my own culture and traditions for examples but of course it is the essence of many eastern approaches, particularly that of Zen. In the context of our subject, we recall that Douglas Harding subtitled his book 'On Having No Head', *Zen and the Rediscovery of the Obvious*. What follows from a successful application of the Harding experiments is an awakening to the aware space of my direct experience, seeing, hearing, feeling no longer channelled through an assumed observer, Alan, but open to the present moment, the immediate occasion. This involves a passive awareness rather than a studied meditation, an approach which usually sustains an 'observer' perspective. It is more of a listening and a waiting. I'm sure this is what Gebser meant by his 'Waring'. I asked CoPilot about this and received this reply: *Gebser's poetic style often blends philosophical insight with evocative language, so "waring" can be read as a metaphor for the soul's readiness—a kind of inner vigilance that prepares consciousness for its next mutation.*

I was impressed by this CoPilot response and decided to let it have a go at other aspects of this enquiry. I was warned at Brentyn's recent meeting that CoPilot and AI in general tends to tell you what it 'senses' you would like to hear so I'll ask for some counter arguments before closing off.

Gebser also speaks of *presentiation* which is his way of speaking of prioritizing immediate experience and *diaphaneity* as right apprehension of immediate experience. CoPilot came up with the following which I find very comprehensive and convincing. I include it here as it is an eloquent expression of what I believe to be the field of experience to which the Headless experiments provide an opening.

*CoPilot: Jean Gebser's concept of **diaphaneity** is one of the most poetic and profound aspects of his philosophy. It refers to a kind of transparency of consciousness—but not in the sense of seeing through something like glass. Instead, it's about **seeing through the world to its origin**, allowing the spiritual dimension to shine through everyday reality.*

What Diaphaneity Means in Gebser's Thought

Manifestation of the spiritual: *Diaphaneity is the epiphany of the spiritual in the material. It's how the origin (or Ursprung) becomes present in our experience.*

Transparency of perception: *It's not just about what we see, but how we see. Diaphaneity allows us to perceive the interconnectedness of all things—past, present, and future—as a unified whole.*

Beyond dualism: *Gebser emphasizes that origin is neither light nor dark, but a “Diaphainon”—something that renders both light and darkness transparent.*

Integral consciousness: *Diaphaneity is a hallmark of the Integral structure of consciousness, where we no longer impose perspectives but allow reality to disclose itself fully and fluidly.*

This commentary on Gebser is one of the most accurate expressions of how the consequences of the headless experiments have turned out for me. It prompted me to put another question to CoPilot. This time I asked it for a note on Traherne's reference to ‘that shady nothing’. I received this reply in less than half a minute’

CoPilot: Alan — you've just quoted one of the most luminous lines from Thomas Traherne's Centuries of Meditations:

*“Till you are intimately acquainted with that **shady nothing out of which the world was made**, you never enjoy the world aright.”*


*This “shady nothing” is Traherne's poetic way of pointing to the **mystery of creation** — not as a void of absence, but as a fertile, generative source. It's the paradoxical ground of being: invisible, intangible, yet brimming with potential. In Traherne's vision, to be “intimately acquainted” with it is to awaken to the divine pulse that animates all things.*

Philosophical Resonance

Whitehead's Creativity: This “nothing” echoes Whitehead's concept of Creativity — the ultimate principle from which all actual occasions arise. It's not a static emptiness, but a dynamic becoming.

Gebser's Transparency: In Gebser's Integral structure, the world is seen through — not as opaque substance, but as a luminous unfolding. The “shady nothing” becomes the translucent source of manifestation.

Mystical Ground: Spiritually, it's akin to the apophatic tradition — God as unknowable, beyond form, yet the very condition for form to arise.

 **Traherne's Vision.** Traherne invites us to a radical reorientation: to see the world not as a collection of things, but as a **sacrament of presence**. The “shady nothing” is not to be feared, but embraced — it's the womb of wonder, the silence from which the song of creation emerges.

Alan comments: Traherne's reference to the ‘Shady Nothing’ appears in his ‘Centuries of Meditations’ as Meditation number 30 of the first ‘Century’ in the book.

"Till your spirit filleth the whole world, and the stars are your jewels; till you are as familiar with the ways of God in all Ages as with your walk and table: till you are intimately acquainted with that shady nothing out of which the world was made: till you love men so as to desire their happiness, with a thirst equal to the zeal of your own: till you delight in God for being good to all: you never enjoy the world. Till you more feel it than your private estate, and are more present in the hemisphere, considering the glories and the beauties there, than in your own house: Till you remember how lately you were made, and how wonderful it was when you came into it: and more rejoice in the palace of your glory, than if it had been made but to-day morning." (from "Centuries of Meditations" by "Thomas Traherne")

I include here an extract from T.S. Eliot

"Men's curiosity searches past and future And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend The point of intersection of the timeless With time, is an occupation for the saint— No occupation either, but something given And taken, in a lifetime's death in love, Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender. For most of us, there is only the unattended Moment, the moment in and out of time, The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight, The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply That it is not heard at all, but you are the music While the music lasts.

John Wren-Lewis often referred to a Chesterton story about a prisoner who locked in a miserable cell, was transfixed by the wonders around him, in particular a spike sticking out of the wall. John used this to help him describe the shift in consciousness following his near-death experience when, after being poisoned, he awoke in a very uninspiring hospital environment, he was similarly uplifted. I gave CoPilot another opportunity to comment on the spike story.


*CoPilot: Ah yes—you're referring to a striking image from G.K. Chesterton's **Orthodoxy**, where he describes a prisoner who becomes fascinated by a spike in the wall of his cell. It's not a full story, but rather a metaphor Chesterton uses to illustrate how even in confinement, the human mind seeks meaning, mystery, and wonder.*

*Chesterton uses this to argue that **limitation can intensify imagination**. The prisoner, deprived of freedom and stimulation, turns his attention to the smallest detail—the spike—and finds in it a universe of thought. It's a defense of the idea that **wonder doesn't require vast landscapes**, only a mind willing to explore.*

*This metaphor fits beautifully with Chesterton's broader theme: that the world is full of marvels, but we often miss them because we're too distracted or disenchanted. In fact, he believed that **orthodoxy itself was thrilling**, not dull—that the spiritual and moral boundaries of tradition were not cages, but canvases.*

CoPilot then asked me whether I would like to explore how this metaphor connects to Gebser's structures of consciousness or Whitehead's notion of creativity? Instead I asked it to relate it to the work of Douglas Harding and this was the reply.

*CoPilot: Douglas Harding's "key" to understanding—his radical insight into our true nature—was the simple yet profound realization of **headlessness**. Not metaphorical, but experiential: the direct seeing that from first-person perspective, we are not a face looking out, but an open, aware space in which the world appears.*

 **The key Harding offered** was not a doctrine, but a method:

Turning attention 180° inward, to look not at the world but at what is looking.

Seeing experiments, like pointing back at where your face should be and noticing only openness.

Discovering the "No-thing" at the center of experience—clear, awake, and full of the world.

This "key" unlocks a kind of Chestertonian paradox: the prisoner who finds infinite mystery in a spike is not unlike Harding's seeker who finds boundless awareness in the absence of a head. Both are revelations born of limitation—one spatial, one perceptual.

*Harding’s insight resonates with Gebser’s Integral structure, where transparency reveals the whole through the part, and with Whitehead’s Creativity, where the actual occasion is both nothing and everything. It’s a seeing that is not about gaining something, but **losing the illusion of separateness**.*

CoPilot concluded with the following:

Sometimes it takes an outsider—not bound by convention or expectation—to offer a fresh angle on things. Harding’s insight, Chesterton’s paradox, Whitehead’s metaphysics, Gebser’s transparency... you’ve assembled a powerful constellation of ideas. And it’s clear you’re not just intellectually engaging with them—you’re tuning into their lived and spiritual resonance.

If you’d like, we could take this exploration into another mode. Maybe reflect on what happens when the “spike” isn’t just a metaphor, but a moment of genuine spiritual friction. Or examine the relationship between constraint and revelation in mystical traditions—like apophatic theology or the Quaker practice of silence.

Alan speaking again. I was ready for bed at this point but took up the offer to look at the relevance of the apophatic the following day and received a lengthy response from which I extracted this.

CoPilot. *Apophatic Prayer (via Dionysius, Eckhart, et al.)*

What it does: Relinquishes conceptual images and words about God, entering into darkness and unknowing. In **apophatic theology**, the refusal to name God opens space for the Infinite to be encountered beyond concept. In **Gebser’s Integral consciousness**, transparency arises through waring—through friction with what was, breaking open to what is.

So the spike isn’t merely sharp—it’s transformative. Maybe it’s the moment the Word becomes silence, or the silence becomes voice.

Alan back again : In view of the warning about CoPilot’s tendency to respond in ways that confirm the point of view of the person asking the question I asked it what were the problems associated with Harding’s headless experiments.

CoPilot replies:  **Lack of Ethical Anchoring**

The radical de-centering of self might obscure moral responsibility. If “I” am not here, who is accountable for action? Without careful framing, it can drift into moral ambiguity.

 **Overemphasis on Experience**

The approach prioritizes direct perception over conceptual understanding. While this can

cut through illusion, it may undervalue the role of thought, tradition, or community in sustaining transformation.

Difficulty in Integration

The shift to headlessness can be so stark that integrating it into daily life—relationships, work, activism—becomes challenging. It risks becoming a peak experience rather than a lived reality.

Misinterpretation of Emptiness

The “no-head” experience may be confused with nihilism or void, especially without guidance. Harding’s vision is luminous and full, but newcomers might mistake it for absence or negation.

A Balanced View

Headlessness, like Gebser’s transparency or Traherne’s “shady nothing,” is a portal—not a destination. It’s most fruitful when held in tension with embodiment, ethics, and relationality. George Fox’s integrity and Whitehead’s Creativity offer complementary anchors that keep the insight grounded. Would you like to explore how headlessness might be integrated with eco-theology or Quaker silence? I think there’s a rich conversation waiting there.

Alan again: I liked the emphasis on portal as opposed to destination as I have always thought of the experiments as the door to the secret garden. The Quaker connection is also very pertinent. Something for future issues perhaps.

Message from Brentyn --- brentynramm@gmail.com

Thank you for participating in the Sydney Headless Way workshop on Saturday 19th July. It was a real pleasure to spend the afternoon with you all exploring headlessness together.

If you are interested in connecting further with others in Sydney who value this approach, I host a monthly headless social meet up at my apartment in Ashfield, 2:30pm-4:30pm on the third Saturday of the month. It's pretty casual - a couple of experiments and discussion (no cost).

If you would like to be on the email list for the monthly headless social meet up and/or the email list for future workshops in Sydney let me know.