

A Mystical Awakening

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'Opening of the heart' is a term often used in connection with spiritual awakening, and it is usually equated with conversion to religious belief. For me, it was absolutely the other way about. My heart opened and began to grow spiritually in 1936, my first year as a scholarship-boy at grammar school, when I started reading books from the library and found it was possible *not* to believe in God. The sense of astonished relief - which was indeed like waking from a long, miserable dream of imprisonment under a cosmic gaoler - became the foundation of my inner life from there on out, and has remained so right through the rest of my threescore years and ten, despite some radical changes in religious outlook along the way. In fact when a close encounter with death in my sixtieth year brought full-blooded - and totally unexpected - mystical awakening, it came as the fulfilment, not in any way a denial, of that early liberation.

Until that teenage discovery, I'd taken the Big Boss in the Sky as much for granted as the sky itself, even though my family were only irregular church-goers. I can't remember if I ever raised any of those hackneyed metaphysical puzzles with which young children notoriously plague parents, like 'Who made God?' or 'What clothes was Jesus wearing when he rose from the dead?', but I doubt very much if such questions even crossed my mind. Big issues of any kind, natural or supernatural, were simply never raised in our dim cramped home in a slum area of south-east England, where I was the only child of a former housemaid and an unemployed blacksmith. Such matters were automatically assumed to be beyond the reach of ordinary mortals.

I can remember being quite puzzled in the last year of infants' school when the headmistress, teaching 'Bible Study', asked the class where God was, and demurred at the unanimous response, 'In the sky, Miss'. She decided to let it go, but said we'd find the answer wasn't so simple when we got older. I had no idea what she could be getting at: I took for granted that everything my parents said was true, and for them God was the All-Seeing-Eye-Above, who within living memory had struck a local dockworker blind for blaspheming with the oath 'Gorblimey' (which they carefully explained to me was a contraction of 'God blind me')

I simply didn't enquire, even in my own mind, exactly where this God fitted into the heavens whose stars and planets I'd begun to read about with fascination in Arthur Mee's *Childrens' Encyclopaedia*, a gift from my mother's former employers. Mr Mee seemed to take God and the Jesus story as much for granted as my parents did, while they for their part constantly impressed on me the dangers of probing into matters about which humans, especially those of our lowly kind, weren't supposed to ask questions. After all, hadn't all the world's troubles started, way back, because Adam and Eve ate a forbidden fruit that somehow gave them the wrong sort of knowledge? And weren't we all still under a terrible burden of guilt because some of our ancestors had doubted the Boss's Son when he graciously paid our world a visit?

My parents weren't stupid; both had been at the top of their respective forms in school just before the First World War. But the exercise of their intelligence had been jackbooted by a social system which caused *their* parents to refuse offers of scholarships to the local grammar schools on the grounds that it was improper to educate children 'above their station'. Those were the cap-touching, forelock-tugging days when it seemed quite natural to most people that the hymn 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' should contain the verse:

*The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.*

For my father, the 'Kaiser's War' had changed all that. He returned from the trenches knowing that the earthly boss-class told lies, and he never thereafter really trusted what anyone said about the Celestial Bosses (God & Son, with their strange Ghostly partner). But he'd also learned it was hopeless for 'the likes of us' to question authority or established opinion, because 'they' controlled all sources of information, and could trump any card of argument we might advance. When I told him about things I was reading, most notably in the works of H. G. Wells, he warned

me I couldn't trust anything I read in books, because there were sure to be other books somewhere that said the opposite, and we ordinary folk had no way of checking what was right. We couldn't even trust our own understanding of statements in the Bible, since there were probably other passages which said something different, and we had no way even of finding them in that vast book, leave alone knowing how to reconcile the contradictions.

He also recommended keeping quiet about expressing disbelief in God, since such signs of dissidence would be noted by the local bosses and held against me when I needed a job later on. (It had taken some heavy lobbying from my primary school headmaster to persuade my father to let me sit for that grammar school scholarship which my grandparents had deemed unwise for him, and my questioning of Establishment metaphysics confirmed his fear that it was indeed a risky course on which he'd allowed me to embark.) A few years later, early in the Second World War, Wells wrote a novel which captured the troglodytic atmosphere of my childhood home perfectly, and its title, *You Can't be Too Careful*, epitomised my father's fundamental outlook. Its main character echoed him almost word for word on the folly of reading:

Suppose - now suppose even there was something in all that stuff you get in books. There's 'undreds of books saying this and that and the other thing. Who's to tell which is right? I ask you.....

My mother, by contrast, was genuinely shocked by my questioning of religious ideas as well as apprehensive that it might bring down divine wrath. Perhaps because her domestic service had been with a kindly and generous family, she managed to retain a basic belief that Our Betters, including God and Jesus, really did know what was best for everyone. She went along with my father to the extent of recognizing that some of them were exploiters, but remained stubbornly convinced that these were just exceptions, odd bad apples in the barrel. She was sure that all English royalty, most of the nobility and gentry, the best of our local employer-class, and of course God & Son, were doing the right thing, even if many things they did seemed unpleasant to our poor ignorant eyes. Her warning consisted of telling me about a novel called *When it was Dark*, by Guy Thorne, a cautionary tale which showed how loss of belief in God would immediately plunge the world into a chaos of war, rape and pillage.

Many years later I unearthed that novel, which had been a 1905 bestseller, and found it even more specific in its warning than my mother had told me. It depicts the world collapsing into 'horrid confusion and anarchy' as soon as doubt is cast on the resurrection of Jesus by the scholarly machinations of a wicked Jewish financier, bent on destroying the British Empire by undermining its spiritual foundation, Christianity. The rot begins to set in with people staying away from Christmas shopping, while a woman character laments how 'there's no Jesus to save poor girls any more' - but soon 'India is aflame', while at home 'wild free-thought' takes over and 'the brute in man is unchained', bringing 'unmentionable orgies'. The day is saved when Our Hero, an intrepid young Anglican clergyman, comes to the aid of those pillars of righteousness, the Prime Minister of England and the Editor of *The Times*, to expose the Hebrew financier's forgery and restore the True British Resurrection Faith

Somehow the emotional core of that novel's world-view had survived for my mother despite the destruction of many of its specific elements by the Great War and the disillusion brought by my father's experience in the trenches. Between them, my parents and most of their relatives and acquaintances covered the complete spectrum of that 'stale, resentful fatalism about Them and Us' which Arthur Koestler identified, even after Hitler's war, as characteristic of the British working class, by contrast with the fierce revolutionary class hatred to be found on the Continent. Koestler, however, never understood the psycho-metaphysical roots of that fatalism, any more than Marx did when he called religion the opiate of the people, for there was hardly any fantasy of 'pie in the sky by and by when you die' in the religious outlook of either of my parents.

There was simply a sense of utter powerlessness in a social and material cosmos which at best flung down occasional scraps of happiness to those who behaved themselves, but more often meted out disease and disaster, presumably as punishment for the transgression of some rule we hadn't been told about. The really awful thing about religion was that it removed even the hope that death might bring 'happy release', as Hamlet's famous speech so eloquently asserted centuries earlier; the undiscovered country beyond the grave would doubtless contain a similar ratio of preponderant misery as this world, since the same inscrutable Boss was in charge there.

Yet the all-pervading sense of 'invincible ignorance' made it possible for my parents to avoid actually joining any church, since we lowly folk had no way of knowing which of the rival churches was the right one; the only thing they were sure about was that the Catholic Church, with its 'bowing and scraping' and high ceremonials, was a superstition thrust on England by the heathen Europeans. Their attendance at either the parish Anglican church or (more commonly) one of the local nonconformist churches was paradoxical. It was undoubtedly done on the insurance policy principle, yet they invariably came away complaining that the whole affair was hypocritical play-

acting, with parson, choir and regular congregation mouthing 'vain repetitions' to affirm their membership of a snobbish in-group from which we were excluded by never having been let in on the secret of what things to repeat. If my parents thought at all about the logic of attending church under these circumstances, my guess is that they hoped God would give them brownie points for having at least made the gesture, though they had no real feeling that he might be truly caring for such insignificant creatures as ourselves.

Looking back now, I still find it both puzzling and disgraceful that in all those years I never heard a word from any pulpit indicating that the preachers weren't talking about the same Celestial Boss that my parents - and indeed most of our neighbours - believed in. The only difference I ever observed between my parents and the clergy, or the senior teachers who conducted school assemblies each morning, was that these authority-figures spoke of the Almighty and his doings with the kind of familiarity that comes from belonging to an Inner Circle of *cognoscenti*. Thus they were more ready than my parents to talk about God loving and caring for people, but never once did I hear any serious address given to the inhuman aspects of the natural order which their God had created, other than vague generalizations about his wisdom being greater than ours, sending things like disease and natural disaster to test our faith. I suppose it's quite possible that some of these sermonizers were people of genuine good will, perhaps even active workers for betterment of the poor, but their theology as preached came across with precisely the same practical and emotional impact as the socioeconomic preachments of the right-wing press - accept humbly whatever tough conditions are handed down to you, because in some mysterious way they're all for the best.

Grammar school never overcame my sense of social exclusion from the educated classes. The better-off boys' families probably found me far too gauche and poorly dressed to have me in their homes, and anyway I myself shied away from such invitations, fearful I wouldn't know how to behave properly. My father, who by this time was scraping a living as a self-employed plumber and locksmith, was occasionally allowed into such homes as a workman, and invariably came back with accounts of rampant snobbery reigning there. My mother, moreover, discouraged social contacts of any kind, because she had a neurotic fear of germs lurking in every corner she'd not personally inspected. She took the injunction that cleanliness is next to godliness to the point of treble-washing every household utensil her precious child used and every piece of clothing I wore; she even forced my father to move us to cheap rooms near my new school so I could come home for lunch and avoid using the school toilets.

So for the initial grammar school years I escaped the experience of social alienation from parents which many latter-day sociologists have noted as a common fate of working-class children who win scholarships. What I did experience was profound *intellectual* alienation from the atmosphere of invincible ignorance that reigned in my home. In my mind this alienation became focused into a polarity between the newly discovered world of Science (with a Wellsian capital S), which stood for real knowledge and hence for empowerment, and the religion I'd been brought up in, which stood for fatalistic acceptance of the *status quo*, wherein the ultimate powerlessness of all human beings against remorseless nature was reflected in the social powerlessness of most human beings in the hierarchical social order. I flung myself into science studies at school with a kind of missionary zeal, inspired by fantasies of becoming one of those brave white-coated liberators depicted in Wells' *The Shape of Things to Come*.

And since I could share none of this with my parents and little with my pedestrian-minded schoolfriends, I lived largely in a private world of imagination, until Hitler blew everybody's world apart just as I'd matriculated with an impressive array of distinctions. In the few attempts I did make to share my thoughts with others during those school years, I called myself an atheist for want of any better term, but my inner belief-system had nothing in common with the dreary secularism which I later found espoused by most who used that title. Yes, I insisted Jesus was simply an ethical prophet, not the supernatural being pretending to be human (like Zeus on his escapades from Olympus) in whom my parents believed and about whom the local clergy seemed to be preaching. But my private worldscape was anything but mundane. It was somewhat like that of the movie *Star Wars* a generation later; I saw myself joining a crusade of human intelligence against a whole universe of oppressive law that had no regard for the sensitive beings it had somehow spawned. In my mind's eye, I was John Skywalker battling for the creative human spirit against a tyrannical cosmic empire.

It would have been more accurate to call the John of those days an anti-theist; since the scientific crusade I dreamed of was to dethrone not just a craven superstitious belief in human minds, but the inhuman rule of nature itself which subjected human life to disease and disaster. I knew nothing then of William Blake except as author of a poem about a little lamb, but I was privately reinventing his idea that the common belief in God as the world's creator is the human mind's personification of nature's purely mechanical aspects. Blake caricatured this God -idea as 'Old Nobodaddy Up Aloft', worshipped by those who preferred mechanical slavery to freedom, and like Blake I saw

'His' overthrow as humanity's only hope. Where Blake envisaged this happening by the triumph of poetic genius in the human mind, however, I wanted to see physical transformation of nature by science.

In other words, the whole feeling-tone both of my atheism and my interest in science was profoundly religious, though I would in those days have repudiated the term indignantly had anyone said so. The opportunity to give public expression to my views and feelings came after Dunkirk, when my mother's heart, weakened by rheumatic fever during the earlier war, gave out under the strain of this new one and released her from a life which, judging by everything I'd observed and heard, had been almost unrelieved anxiety and torment. She lived just long enough into the war to stop me being evacuated with my school to Wales, preferring that I should face the risk of Hitler's bombs to the certainty of Welsh germs. Classes were organized at the local technical college for those of us who stayed behind, but I was at a loose end for much of the time, so when my mother died, my father soon persuaded me to join a young people's debating club based on the local public library, and in this forum I found I had a natural gift for public speaking.

In many religious traditions all around the world, spiritual awakening is affirmed by the assumption of a new personal name, implying a new kind of identity. I unconsciously affirmed the religious feeling of my atheist crusade by changing my name when I began writing for the youth club's news letter. Until then I'd been plain John Peter Lewis, and before my mother died I was only vaguely aware at the back of my mind that my father, normally known just as Christopher, had a second given name of Wren, his mother's family name; both my parents would have considered it dangerous ostentation to call attention to an echo of the name of a famous architect. But in 1941, with an uncharacteristic display of initiative, my father announced his intention of remarrying, and his Welsh bride, a hospital matron with all the positive qualities that my mother's upbringing had squashed, insisted that if she married an Englishman she wanted an English name, not a traditionally Welsh one like Lewis. So they were united as Wren-Lewis, and I was delighted to realize I had claim, albeit indirectly, to the name of a Renaissance Man of the Royal Society's high and palmy days. I became John Wren-Lewis as a first gesture of determination to break with my working-class background and its invincible ignorance, though I lacked the financial wherewithal to make it legal by deed poll until I began earning money several years down the track.

Meantime I soon took over running the library youth club, and thereupon began challenging local clergy to debate, which some, rather to my surprise, accepted. I think my naïve hope was that at least a few amongst them would be men of real good will who, like the hero of Wells's novel *The Soul of a Bishop*, would recant their religious professions when I made them see what religion really stood for. Alas, I was met only with philosophical arguments to defend Christian beliefs about God and the supernatural divinity of Jesus, often backed up by *ad hominem* moral criticisms of Wells and other leading humanist figures. I heard no hint of acknowledgement that the God I'd been brought up to believe in was an infamy, or that Jesus could have been a real fallible human person. And then, in my sixteenth year, a new incumbent at one of the local Anglican parishes, Joseph McCulloch, took the wind out of my sails by agreeing with my denunciation of that kind of religion, instead of trying to persuade me that my objections were mistaken. With the aid of quotations from writers like Blake and John MacMurray, this unusually charismatic cleric, who was something of a celebrity as a broadcaster, asked me to consider that the Christianity I'd known up to then had been a radical distortion of something quite other. That encounter was the beginning of what for many years thereafter I thought of as my conversion to (modernist) Anglicanism, a banner under which I established myself as a writer and broadcaster in the decades following the war's end. It took a major midlife crisis in the 1960s to make me realize that my intellectual conversion during those wartime years was at least 90 per cent rationalization, albeit mostly unconscious rationalization.

For what Joseph offered, by being prepared to meet me on common ground about my childhood religion and then holding out the hand of friendship, was a passport to fulfilling my two greatest soul-needs as I faced the world of adulthood, and I persuaded myself to go along with his Anglicanism to get those needs met. In the first place, at a purely personal level, he and his wife provided the means to a real break with my working-class background, by giving me *entrée* to a world of culture I'd hitherto glimpsed only dimly in books. In psychological jargon (which I think does fair justice to the truth in this case), they became surrogate parents for me, the cultured family I'd never had, with links to London's artistic and intellectual circles. For that privilege alone, I suspect I would have tried to find some kind of accommodation to their churchmanship.

But that social need could have been met through other, non-religious channels - say, by encountering a cultured leftwing political figure, as did the young Lewis Elliott of C. P. Snow's *Strangers and Brothers* novels. What really led me into Anglican commitment was my soul's need for some kind of religious setting to do justice to the transcendental feeling of my prophetic fervour. To say I was a natural born preacher who needed a pulpit rather than

just a debating-platform would be one way of putting it, but my need was more real than that. I felt a sense of *absoluteness* in the human wish for something better than the rough, ruthless harmonies of nature and the inequitable, superstition-ridden social hierarchies that imitated nature's pecking-orders. I had a sense, which defied expression in purely naturalistic terms, of *infinite* value and potential that might be liberated in the human-spirit.

So when Joseph suggested the possibility that the transcendental language of religious poetry - including the poetry of liturgy - had originally referred to something other than Old Nobodaddy and his conformist social values, my mind began working on that possibility with all the talent I could muster. I produced a radical reinterpretation of Christian doctrine, based on the notion that love is the ultimate creative power - not in the sense of a Master Mind Behind the Scenes who 'moves the sun and other stars' in their present blind, impersonal courses, but as a Transcendent Energy in and between human beings before which even the greatest natural forces would ultimately prove plastic if only this love were put into action with scientific knowledge. I worked out interpretations in these terms of the Trinity, the Fall, the Incarnation, the Resurrection and Cosmic Redemption, and in the name of this 'New Theology' (as it came to be called two decades later when quoted by Bishop John Robinson in *Honest to God*), I threw myself into the High Anglican worship of Joseph's church, to the point of swinging incense in procession, serving at Communion and becoming rector's warden.

I think Joseph was taken completely by surprise at what he had unleashed, and to this day I'm not sure how far he himself went along with my 'new theology' - but he supported his protégé generously, even to the point of persuading the bishop to appoint me a lay reader and then allowing me quite frequent use of his pulpit. And thus it came about that I was borne into adulthood on the energy of this new identity as Radical Anglican Scientific Prophet, an energy that over the next two decades carried me through graduation in science from Wells' former college in London University, embarking on a scientific job, marrying, and beginning to write professionally, while Joseph moved on to higher ecclesiastical things. It was only towards the end of my second adult decade that I began to let myself acknowledge how little experiential content there was to my professed faith.

For example, I'd initially thrown myself into performing the traditional acts of prayer and worship in the belief that they were aligning my psyche with the creative love energy which I now called God, but as far as actual experience of creative love-energy was concerned, I was as guilty of performing 'vain repetitions' as the clergy of my childhood had been in my parents' judgement. Or to be more precise, I was as guilty as my parents themselves of 'going through the motions' on an insurance policy principle, albeit in a very different way and for a very different objective. Like them, I practised prayer and sacramental worship in the hope that in some occult way it was producing an effect I would experience in the unspecified future, but where they groped their way through church services in the hope of placating the invisible Boss who would determine their posthumous destiny, I celebrated Anglican liturgy with a sense of high theatre, hoping I was thereby stimulating growth in love-energy that would open up a blissful life of community in this world, somewhere down the track. And whereas my parents never knew to the end of their days whether or not their gesture of church-going had been of any use, I, after twenty years, became disillusioned with sacramental worship when the hope remained unfulfilled of a blissful community wherein love was actually experienced as transcendent reality.

So in the early 1960s I gradually eased off regular churchgoing, but rather than abandon my radical Anglican identity, which by this time had become publicly established by my writings, I tried urging my fellow-Anglicans - and other Christians too - to follow Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer's war-time plea for 'religionless Christianity', perhaps retaining a minimal amount of traditional worship simply for its aesthetic value as theatre, for which I retained real fondness. With this transition I experienced an echo of my twelve-year-old liberation, for it now seemed clear to me that any kind of formal observance is too psychologically bound up with 'God out there' to be a real agent of liberation from imprisonment in the *status quo*, except perhaps on rare occasions of grace. In T. S. Eliot's insightful phrase, thinking about the key to freedom serves only to confirm the prison - an insight which significantly came to Bonhoeffer when he was literally imprisoned by the Nazis.

Then came my midlife crisis, spread over several years, during which I had to acknowledge that even my Christian identity had been a kind of sham, albeit a sham embraced in an adolescent search for some way to express a real transcendental intuition. That intuition continued to nag me even in disillusion, but I was forced in honesty to admit that my belief in 'true' Christianity as a significant agency for human liberation had been pure wishful thinking. Yes, plenty of individual Christians had done magnificent things, but no more so than individuals of other faiths or none - and as far as I could see, the *general culture* of Christianity had been more an agent of Nobodaddy-conformity than of transcendence. In fact my wheel had come full circle, except that my twenty-year Anglican adventure had given me a valuable storehouse of words and images in which Christians down the ages, and non-

Christians living within Christian culture, like George Eliot and Bernard Shaw, had tried to express their hints and guesses of transcendence.

At this stage, however, I was disillusioned about science as well, or at least about my personal ability to practise science in any way that gave expression to my sense that scientific creativity had a transcendent aspect to it. My actual career in science had been a necessary compromise with materialism, and it collapsed at the very same time as my marriage and my identity as a Christian prophet. I was saved from penury by the fact that my writings apparently contained sufficient insights of inspirational or scholarly value to cause people in various parts of the world to want my occasional services as a teacher. I became a wandering scholar and as an appropriate irony, one of my last public engagements before leaving England for good was to deliver the inaugural H. G. Wells Memorial Lecture at Imperial College.

In my subsequent wanderings, I sailed mainly under the banner of the then newly-emergent Human Potential Movement, which held out the hope that if only the discoveries of depth-psychology were 'taken out of the clinic and consulting-room into the marketplace', they could clear away significant blocks from the human psyche and bring precisely that experiential realization of transcendence which my Christian practice had so conspicuously failed to bring. Active participation in this work was made possible for me through partnership with dream psychologist Dr Ann Faraday, who became one of the Movement's major pioneers in the early 1970s. But while I learned a great deal about living a fuller, more balanced emotional life, I 'evermore came out by that same door wherein I went', like a no-longer-young Omar Khayyam, as far as liberation from suffering finite humanness was concerned.

Nothing came my way to justify Blake's claim - quoted to the point of hackneydom in those days - that inner cleansing can translate our vague intuitions of transcendence into actual perception of infinity in life's regular everyday structure. (Even heavy experimentation with high-dosage psychedelics brought only vastly expanded, but still definitely finite, *aesthetic* experience --- fascinating and at times astounding, but still for me essentially humanistic in the negative sense of that word, in that there was nothing truly transcendental about it.) Moreover, this disillusion was shared by others involved in the Human Potential Movement as the 1970s wore on, and many began efforts to 'go beyond psychology' by recovering the 'ancient wisdom' of traditional religious spirituality, mainly in its oriental forms.

To me, however, this seemed clearly a regressive trend, for while the propaganda of the great oriental religions (in contrast to that of Christianity) undoubtedly does emphasize experience of the transcendent as against mere faith and belief, I could find no evidence that in practice their devotees did anything other than spend lives of travelling hopefully towards a future promise of realization - a kind of introverted version of the Western religions 'going through the motions' in the hope of pie in the sky in some distant bye-an-bye. Tales of anyone actually *becoming* liberated into a life based on continuing firsthand experience of the transcendent are so rare that at best I could only consider them inexplicable acts of grace, while my residual scepticism couldn't help suspecting that some at least might be pure legend based on wishful thinking.

Lest I be guilty of misjudging non-Western spirituality from garbled Western versions, I took off with Ann for the orient in 1980, thereafter spending three years in India and a year living with the Senoi tribe of the Malaysian jungle, who maintain a living practice of the oldest of all spiritual forms, shamanism. By my sixtieth year, however, I'd come to the conclusion that the age-old notion of a transcendent dimension to life must after all be delusory. A corner of my mind remained puzzled about why finite beings - myself included - should ever have developed feelings that seemed to require an infinity other than the purely physical infinities of science, but as far as practical life was concerned, I'd given up on such feelings and resigned myself to making the best of what Blake called 'the mundane shell' of ordinary humanness. I didn't greatly relish this new identity as John Sceptic, but there seemed no honest alternative.

So it was John Sceptic who, on the 9.15 a.m. bus from Surat Thani to Phuket in South Thailand on 17 November 1983, forgot the proverbial advice against accepting sweets from strangers, and was some hours later being given emergency treatment for severe opiate poisoning at Surat Thani Hospital, in a coma so deep that the medical team were for some hours uncertain whether or not I would survive. The well-dressed, helpful young man who gave me the drugged Cadbury's toffee was later identified as a thief already 'wanted' for doping foreign travellers in this way prior to stealing their wallets. As far as I know he was never caught, having promptly left the bus at the next stop when Ann foiled his robbery plans by refusing to eat the toffee he'd given her. He almost certainly had no lethal intent, but the doctors estimated from my condition that on this occasion he'd used an overdose of opiate (probably morphine laced with cocaine) which was more than sufficient to kill. If Ann hadn't refused his offer, and then made an heroic effort to get me to hospital when I passed out soon after his departure, my death would have been certain.

And from subsequent enquiries I'm sure it was the close encounter with death, not the drug itself, which was responsible for the fact that when the hospital's resuscitation efforts eventually succeeded, I came round with a radically 'altered state of consciousness' wherein the mundane shell of so-called ordinary human life was completely gone. Subjectively the state was utterly different from anything I'd experienced with psychedelics (or for that matter in experiments with trance or meditation), but more significantly, *it has remained with me ever since*, an effect not found with any drug yet known. In fact this consciousness feels so utterly natural that terms like 'drugged' or 'tranced' seem more appropriate for my earlier life, and I now know firsthand, from more than ten years' continuing daily (and nightly) experience, why at the mystical core of most religious traditions there is found the notion of 'awakening' from an age-long collective human nightmare.

I also know from firsthand experience why those who've actually experienced mystical wakening so often resort to paradox or negation when trying to say anything about it, and frequently resort to terms like 'ineffable'. Almost all human speech derives from that old collective nightmare of separate individuals struggling in an alien space-time world for survival, satisfaction and meaning, whereas I now experience myself and everyone else - indeed every *thing* else - as more like the continuous dance-like activity of a universal, truly infinite Consciousness/Aliveness whose very nature is satisfaction and 'meaning' in an eternal Presentness, from which Separation (space) and activity (time) are continuously created.

This must surely be what terms like God-consciousness originally meant, yet from the ordinary human perspective such theological expressions inevitably suggest a separate human 'me' being conscious *of* God. My experience, however, is God - Infinite Aliveness - *cognizing me (and everyone and everything else) into existence* instant by instant, and this consciousness finds *everything* 'very good'. And this must surely also be what Hinduism and Buddhism mean by Nirvana extinguishing the illusion of separate selfhood, though from the ordinary human standpoint such expressions have a punitive sound. My sense, by contrast, is of selfhood as the continuing product of infinite lovingness, which to my never-ceasing astonishment takes the sting of suffering out of even the most humanly 'unpleasant' situations, including the prospect of personal extinction.

And so it is that mystical awakening, which came to me by a complete act of grace (through something remarkably like a literal process of death and resurrection), has enabled me late in life to find meaning I never suspected in a great many of humanity's religious attempts to express transcendence. Yet because it is a meaning so utterly at odds with all conventional understanding of such expressions, I can now see very clearly why, at each phase of my earlier life, heart-opening always came more through breaking away from religious forms than from conforming to them. I now look back with gratitude on all those earlier struggles with religion as my personal twentieth century version of what mystical traditions have called the Way of Negation