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Greville Street Gatherings

Our monthly meetings were suspended because of Covid concerns. We substituted Zoom meetings for a while. I thought we might restart in April and the question is whether to return to our face-to-face gatherings or continue to rely on Zoom. As we have a large proportion of elderly participants it is probably best to postpone face-to-facers until we are all vaccinated. In the meantime, we could try to carry on with Zoom which has one advantage, the opportunity to include friends too far away from Sydney to be at the traditional meetings, and especially to engage with overseas friends.

So, I plan to have a Zoom on the first Sunday of 28th March. Unless I have alternative offers I will say something about the subject I mentioned before close-down, Traherne's question of "Are you not drawn to some great thing?", my response to that question and to which I am hoping you will add yours.

The New Information Age? From Trisha English

Fifty years ago if you wanted information you would have read a book, bought a newspaper, or listened to a radio station.

Today, it is a completely different matter. Information is everywhere, from the TV stations that you watch, to the social media you are connected to, and the apps on your mobile phone. If you have Fetch on Optus, or the equivalent on Telstra, you can, for a small monthly fee, preference your television stations from overseas and have ready access to YouTube and Netflix and other sources such as SBS on Demand. The films and documentaries range from incredible to thought-provoking and come from all over the world.

You no longer have to be a slave to the ABC, why not go to the country in question and see for yourself what is going on? The commentaries are all in English but emanate from the country of origin. You can have the news from France, the news from the UK, the news from China, Singapore, the Middle East, USA, Europe and so on. If you want the truth, you have to work for it. If you are too lazy, or time poor, that is okay but you must accept the fact that whatever you hear may lack verification and evidence.

Sky News in NSW boasts the presence of Alan Jones, who will tell you that the Coronavirus is a Left Wing conspiracy. It is no worse in his view than the common cold, and he cites some obscure Indian to support his view.

If you go to any other TV station the world over, you will hear the appalling truth that this pandemic is a killer and is mutating faster than I can press the keys on my computer. The entire world is in a state of chaos and what emerges is a single pattern of inadequate hospital facilities and widespread political ineptitude. But you don't have to believe me, you can see and hear it for yourself. But you do have to access reliable information. Without evidence, spurious opinions abound.

The USA is not the only country in which disharmony and dissent and protests have become the order of the day. In Australia friends and families are divided and at loggerheads over everything from the treatment of indigenous people to the lack of adequate housing for the poor and jobless.

There are marches and protests in France, in Italy, in the USA, in Australia, in the Middle East, in India, Myanmar, Hong Kong and Russia just to mention a few countries. Soothing words from the leaders do not appear to appease the masses. This seems to be the outcome everywhere and maybe it is due to leaders being more concerned with conserving their own power than actually dealing with the problems.

Housewives in Australia will have noticed how inflation is creeping in. Goods and services are becoming expensive and often out of the reach of most people. I enquired recently about having my printer connected to my new computer, only to be told that I would have to pay \$200 per hour. By sheer willpower and good fortune, I managed to solve the problem myself. But it was mainly due to the online help which was available.

Help is not always available. My girlfriend lives next door to the daughter whose mother was grossly neglected in an upmarket nursing home. She had a hole in her back. Death by neglect is becoming a recurring feature of the nursing home scene.

At the beginning of January, I heard from a dear friend in India that her husband had died suddenly from Covid 19. He had gone to hospital for his dialysis treatment but never came home. He contracted the virus, seemed to be improving, but suddenly expired. No family member held his hand, or said goodbye.

Yesterday, a dear colleague phoned me to inform me that last week her mother and paraplegic brother died from Covid 19. They lived in Wales where hospital infrastructure is sparse to say the least. It came as a cruel blow that her mother and brother died within four hours of each other. No other family members were present, and even if she had wanted to be at their bedside, it would have been impossible.

So far Australia has done well in escaping the worst of the virus. But Winter will soon be upon us, and I have this awful feeling that we will all be in the firing line again. I just hope we have not been numbed by complacency or the fatuous remarks of Alan Jones et.al., that the Coronavirus is not a pandemic but a conspiracy. According to international commentators, this virus has killed more people than the total number of deaths which resulted from World War II. Nevertheless, it is true that it has not, as yet, reached the estimated total of 50 million souls who perished from the Spanish Flu.

Just be safe dear friends. *Question everything.* Get your information from as many sources as possible. Most of all, have a little compassion. The life you save, may be your own.

Trisha English, WA

On Meaning from Peter Lim

It's infinitely better not to acquire than to later discard things which at first sight, seemed irresistible, but subsequently found to be blasé.

Materialism has taken away our love and appreciation of the beautiful and authentic that's found in all great works of art and all forms of rich human creativity.

Because we are spiritually blind, we find little joy in living---we drift along, often aimlessly, listlessly, wearily; we complain and whinge; we blame others or circumstances for our unhappiness, discontent, restlessness and angst, but never ourselves.

Habits and attitudes perpetuate and we sink deeper in the inane quagmire of our own doing. We become morally bankrupt.

Finding meaning is a matter of choice--it's never too late

(From my diary—Peter Lim)

Joel Goldsmith from Margaret Gracey.

(Margaret sent me this extract from Joel Goldsmith some months ago. It was in longhand, Margaret is our one remaining non-computer contributor, and this contribution has been awaiting conversion to a computer friendly format. Alan)

There is only one enemy-the universal belief that material and mental force can control this world. The enemies confronting us today (Written in the 1960') are not a threatened epidemic of disease, not a devastating condition of weather or climate, not impending economic disaster, not destructive war: all these are but part and parcel of the belief in material and mental powers. Prior march are material and mental powers, powers.

But are material and mental powers-power? Or is the Still Small Voice the only power? The answer is that there is no power in the visible world, and anything that exists in our mind as an

objective thing is not power. Let us never fear an image in our mind whether that image is a person, a disease, or even a bomb.

That Still Small Voice in the midst of us is mightier than all of these, and if we can become so silent that the voice can utter itself – even if only as a deep breath or a sense of peace warmth - this earth will be filled with the voice of God and the belief in two powers will be silenced..

When we struggle and battle with the enemy, whether that enemy is physical and external or mental and internal, we do not win any victories. The real victories are won when we use no power and do not fight opposition, but rest in the knowledge that all opposition destroys itself.

Misdemeanour, a story by Margot Mann

"The demeanour of a card player is very important," Josie said as she carried the breakfast dishes to the sink. Robert was reading a newspaper analysis of an exciting football match between the Crusaders and the Tahs the previous evening. "Un-believable," he said for the fourth time.

"The captain of the bridge team congratulated me on my demeanour last night," Josie continued, more loudly. "He told me I was a good role model for some of the younger players who don't know how to behave and who lack the proper demeanour for a game like bridge."

Robert looked up. "You can't blame some of those guys 'for not knowing how to behave' (he spoke in inverted commas). I bet you'd find it hard to be a footie role model if you were being paid mega bucks and worshipped by thousands of fans. Role model, huh. Overweight role model maybe." He sniggered as he whipped the pages of newspaper together with a sharp crack.

"Demeanour," Josie repeated, rolling the word around on her tongue, - "he meant appropriate behaviour during a bridge game, especially during a match. You focus on the cards, don't talk or crack silly jokes and you're polite to everyone. And you don't cheat." Dishes clattered in the sink as she turned on the hot tap.

"Those guys do not cheat," Robert said, emphasising each word with a thwack of the folded newspaper on the kitchen table. "Sometimes there will be a head-high tackle but that's just in the heat of the game." He threw the newspaper onto the table and left the room.

Josie added detergent to the dishes in the sink and washed them slowly, enjoying the warmth of the water. She gazed out of the kitchen window and idly watched magpies feasting on the scraps of porridge she left out for them. Her mind drifted back to something she had been thinking about - for a long time, if she were honest, but especially lately: killing Robert. She thought of Agatha Christie's novels where so many of the murder victims were poisoned, often with arsenic, which was apparently hard to detect as it happened over weeks, with small incremental doses in their food causing the victims to become more and more ill. A mystery programme on TV that she and Robert watched each week had recently shown how arsenic was used to eliminate a very rich and rather unpleasant man whose wife wanted his money. Robert had hoped that the wife was the murderer and that she would get caught, (greedy bitch he called her), but Josie reminded him that the killer is nearly always the person you least expect.

In the TV story, the murderer was found to be the victim's gardener, who used to meet his rich employer in the greenhouse every morning at 11 am precisely for morning tea, which always consisted of the gardener's famous home-made biscuits. The employer couldn't bring himself to admit, even to himself, that he was addicted to these biscuits, and chose not to interrogate

the gardener on the matter - which was probably just as well, as it may have jeopardised the cultivation of a small head-laden patch of marijuana at the other end of the greenhouse (or conservatory, as the owner called it.) His dead body had been found by the gardener where he had collapsed into a bed of truss tomatoes, and the post-mortem identified a large quantity of arsenic and some marijuana in his body.

The television story then showed the gardener in court being questioned as to how a packet of arsenic powder, kept in the greenhouse to deter rats, could have become mixed up with some marijuana kept in a brown paper bag, also in the greenhouse. He could only keep repeating that his employer was a very demanding man and really the only thing that had kept him in the job was the unfailing support of the employer's wife who had stood up for him on numerous occasions when her husband complained about his work and who had already given the court a character reference on his behalf. In fact, the gardener pointed out, smiling warmly across the courtroom at the wife of his dead employer, it had been at her suggestion that he had purchased the arsenic because the greenhouse had been overrun with rats at the time, but it was his idea to grow the marijuana - strictly for personal use of course, he added hastily - and for the use of friends, including the employer himself, although he did not add that the employer may not have realised this at the time. He smiled again as he was sentenced to six months community service. As the TV credits rolled, the grieving widow could be seen at the end of a long garden path being comforted by the gardener. It was difficult to tell for sure, because only one cigarette was visible, but it looked as though they were smoking. Robert was enraged by this outcome and vowed to complain to the television station. He was even more annoyed by Josie's apparent enjoyment of the story.

Josie sighed, wiped down the bench, threw the dishcloth into the sink and walked quickly from the kitchen. She was thinking that proper behaviour, or as the bridge team captain put it, correct demeanour, got you nowhere, really. Life was unfair and that was that.

She was the secretary of the local bridge club, which had about twenty members and met every week on a Monday night, and there were emails she must send before the Annual General Meeting next month. She caught sight of herself as she walked past the mirror in the hall, and remembered the bridge competition the previous night. It was sweet of the team captain to say that stuff about demeanour. He wasn't able to come very often because of his job. She blushed slightly, threw her shoulders back and looked down demurely at an imaginary hand of cards. After a moment and with another long sigh, she walked to her computer and typed some notes about discussion topics for the upcoming meeting. There were always letters of complaint to table, she thought resignedly, skimming through the complaints folder. This time, one of the members was complaining about the way the tables were organised on bridge nights. Nearly every night recently, according to the complainant, she had been stuck with an inferior player, usually the same one, and their table was always the cold one in the corner with the worst light. She hadn't said anything up to this point, but felt that the matter must be addressed at the AGM, which she would be attending to make sure. Enough was enough, etc. Yours sincerely. Josie groaned.

She flipped back to incoming mail on her computer and noticed a short message from the team captain. She read it quickly. "Didn't get a chance to tell you last night but I'm off to UK for a year or so - all very sudden. Best wishes to you and the Club - sorry to miss the AGM ☹️, Geoff. P.S. I know you're trying to lose weight. Have you thought of the 5/2 diet?"

Margot Mann

On Nothing from Alan Mann

For many years I have been intrigued by references to ‘nothing’, to the significance assigned to a word which is usually considered to be a synonym for insignificance. For example, sometime in the mid 17th century Traherne claims “... that greatest is which nothing seems”.

Does the ‘no thing’ hide its significance in its transparency? Perhaps we tend not to see it but to ‘see through it’. A hundred years or so before Traherne, Shakespeare observed that we are—*most ignorant of what we are most assured—our glassy essence*, and Traherne himself, referring to the necessary shift in perception and, speaking about that of which we are most assured, describes it as *‘the glass in which we all things everlasting see’*. We can round that off with Kierkegaard’s version *‘True religion is to be grounded transparently in the power that constitutes one’*. There are many examples of this in all traditions and I have accumulated quite a collection.

The poets offer the most helpful expressions of this no-thingness, I included examples from Emily Dickinson in the last edition, but we also get occasional reminders from contemporary physicists that what we tend to regard as empty space is far from being void:

“Space is not empty. It is full, a plenum as opposed to a vacuum, and is the ground for the existence of everything, including ourselves. The universe is not separate from this cosmic sea of energy.” – David Bohm.

I first became involved with the question in my forties when, for some reason I became intrigued by how it is possible for painters to portray transparent items, glass tumblers, flower-pots, wine glasses etc. I even took up a brush myself to solve the mystery and the result has been sitting on a window-sill at Greville Street as a reminder ever since. At that stage I hadn’t related my interest in objective examples of transparency to the possibility of an inner transparency. However, it did send me off to find out what the sages had to say. I discovered that the sages had a lot to say about what I assumed to be related matters. For example, that the mystery is not that the transparency itself is mysterious, because it is always the case, and the mystery lies in my inability to apprehend it and, consequently, remain ‘most ignorant of what I’m most assured’.

As my friends and NOWletter readers know, the question and quest, was finally resolved in my case when I came across Douglas Harding whose gift to me was a demonstration that the mystery cannot be resolved by saying, however, eloquently expressed. It has to be experienced, and the transparency lies in seeing that the assumed screen of self, through which I filter my world, just isn’t there and what is there, if I can put aside what I know about what is going on for a change, is the ‘glassy essence’; revealed by simply removing the assumed mask of self-identity.

So, to what extent do I consciously live from that perspective, as awareness, as glassy essence? Certainly not all the time, not even most of the time. I default to the third person Alan as a matter of course. However, the alternative perspective is always the case and available for the looking, an enhanced awareness, prompted usually by an intensification of interest in something observed, heard or felt.

How does it work out in everyday life and how is it different from what I previously regarded as normal? In trying to find an effective explanation I thought of it as if my normal, third person perspective was like living in a house with an unexplored room, a room that is locked or in some way inaccessible, only to discover the first-person perspective which reveals that not only is the room accessible but that I am always in it and that it includes the whole house, whether

I realise it to be so or not. A rather strained metaphor I know but I can't think of a better at the moment.

To what extent does the restoration of our first-person perspective relate to enlightenment? I don't know. Enlightenment is a slippery concept, it means different things to different people, ranging from ecstatic transformation to a simple and, in retrospect, obvious realignment of our everyday 'take' on what happens. I favour the latter version and believe the change is adequately described as 'the wider view'.

Alan Mann

The Human Cosmos — A Secret History of the Stars by Jo Marchant

I was introduced to this book during an email exchange to do with the Nothing of the previous article. It provides a very interesting angle on our long-established interests.

The author looks at human history in the context of our relationship to the universe and the influence of the stars on our myths and meanings. She sets out to provide a human guide to the cosmos, as opposed to the usual scientific versions with which we are familiar. Starting with evidence of stellar representations in palaeolithic cave paintings through to the present day where, due to our dependence on artificial light, we have almost obliterated the milky way. This closing off from the awareness of our universal connectedness, as once revealed by the immediacy of the 'heavens', has led to an increasing sense of separation and the development of an individualistic sense of being as opposed to the participatory engagement with life of early humanity, sometimes retained in the world views of the traditional communities which have maintained their collective understanding. This shift has been amplified since the 'enlightenment' by the success of a scientific focus at the expense of our experiential faculties. There is a chapter on 'Mind' which covers much of which the NOWletter has been concerned with over the years. I conclude this note with the author's concluding paragraph:

"From both practical and philosophical perspectives, then, our personal connection with the cosmos is not a marginal, worthless bit of candy, worth discarding for technological convenience, but part of the essence of what makes us human. Looking back over the history of our relationship with the cosmos shows how we've banished gods, debunked myths, and written our own, evidence-based creation story. Stripping out subjective meaning and focusing on quantifiable observations has given us an epic power to understand and shape the world that dwarfs anything that has gone before. But unchecked, it has the potential to be a cold, narcissistic, destructive force. This is a book about how we closed our eyes to the stars. The challenge now is to open them again."

(from "The Human Cosmos: A Secret History of the Stars" by Jo Marchant)

A Strange Experience in Normandy by Jack Geddes

A reprint from NOWletter 81, June 2002.

(In his Fearless film review in the last issue (No. 80), John Wren-Lewis referred to his friend Jack's experience in a tank battle as another example of the sort of action, under crisis conditions, which the film illustrates. As Jack is a NOWletter subscriber and contributor I asked him to let us use this story of his experience, which he originally prepared for Consciousness Magazine. Ed.)

Experiences are often termed 'mystical' when the recipient encounters a higher form of consciousness which seems to transcend the everyday world to reveal an underlying vision of complete, unified beauty. It is as if one suddenly tumbles through the veils that obscure the senses to discover the tranquillity and beauty of a different order of things. It also seems to be a 'journey out of time'.

The separateness of things in the world disappears and everything is inexplicably 'All One'. The physical becomes dream-like and the newly experienced world becomes 'the real'—somehow more real than anything known before. And an underlying love and compassion invests this world with a sensation that one is 'coming home'.

Except for those like Father Bede Griffiths, who may have achieved such states through personal spiritual disciplines such as yoga I do not believe it is any personal achievement. In my case it simply descended. on me 'out of the blue', and at the time, I had no way of understanding or identifying what had happened to me. Yet, it is as if 'truly, then I saw, now I am blind again'. What remains now is the memory of turbulent thoughts and great emotions that tumbled through me then, and some lasting effects such as banished scepticism and fear of death (though not the manner of dying may this please be merciful!) I have had three mystical experiences, but by far the most significant occurred during a tank battle soon after the Allied landings in Normandy. I had no way of comprehending the experience then and could not even discuss it with the regimental padre when he came over later to see if I needed consolation after my narrow escape from death. When I later went in search of others who might have had a similar experience I found them in the mystical poets and philosophers like Wordsworth, Plotinus, Plato, Meister Eckhart, Dante, Dame Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Whitman, Boeme, Bucke and Koestler.

But let me now recount the experience as I remember it and as one of my colleagues in-arms recorded it.

At that time we were holding the towns of Bayeux and Caen and had just lost the disastrous and strange battle of tanks at Villars Bocage which had involved our medium tanks against 80 ton German Tiger tanks. Often, after the tanks withdrew from battle to leaguer for the night, we could still see, on the horizon, the burning tanks we had lost that day.

This was a sad spectacle, and each night we could only contemplate surviving the morrow, with no concern for the days after tomorrow. When yet another of our tanks 'brewed up' I would wonder when our turn would come. On the day when my worst fears were realised the Canadians, past whom we advanced, were entrenched in a cornfield.

My regiment then was the 4th County of London Yeomanry, known as "Sharpshooters, and equipped with Cromwell medium tanks and a few Sherman "Firefly" tanks which were specially fitted with 17 pounder guns, without which we could not tackle the heavy and better armoured monsters, the German Tiger tanks. I was a Firefly gunner.

The following is taken from an eyewitness's narrative. He was a gunner in a nearby tank and a long lost, but recently rediscovered friend the Rev. John Fisher of Wells in Somerset: He wrote:

"I was looking through my periscope at a Firefly which had just fired at a target unseen to me. This was Jack's tank. I saw the Tiger and asked the Commander if I should fire. He said "No" but it was too late, I had fired. They've got the Firefly, sir", I shouted, as the crew baled out. Jack spent some difficult moments trying to persuade his Commander to get out. I believe the latter was blinded and disoriented, so Jack stood on the hull trying to guide him through the hatch".

The Reverend John Fisher had unwittingly captured the very moments of my mystical experience. A moment before the bale-out I had seen first the vague outlines and then the clearer sight of the heavy German tanks emerging from a smokescreen. I had fired and missed the leading tank which fired back immediately, and more accurately.

I momentarily saw the gun traverse on to us before a non-exploding, armour piercing shell passed through the turret of our tank. With a crash and a strange sulphurous smell it entered just above the mantle to the left of my head. I looked behind me and saw the Commander, who had been looking out of his open hatch, collapse to the turret floor with blood pouring down his face.

It was time to go! The wireless operator had baled out and I followed through the Commander's just vacated hatch. The driver, Alf, had a miraculous escape. Having no open hatch he had to struggle to open one below. As he did so, two more AP shells passed through on either side of him. After our bold rescue, clinging to the back of another tank I could see metal dust, no doubt from the passage of the AP shells, glinting on the hairs of his arms.

Two days later I was back in action again on another tank. Although our Firefly had been struck three times, by some miracle it hadn't caught fire or blown up. The salvage crew rescued our kit but the tank was beyond repair. Fortunately for us, the German counter attack was broken by rockets from Typhoon fighter planes. In reference to my return to the tank after bale-out in order to rescue someone left inside, I must say that such acts were not uncommon. At the 'sharp end', in the midst of battle, the human spirit is quite wonderful.

My mystical experience resembles what I later heard Professor John Wren Lewis describe as a near death experience (NDE). Mine was associated not with an actual temporary clinical death, as in his case, but with a perilously close encounter.

During the instant I was prompted to turn back after the bale-out and during my rapid flight into the cornfield — at my instant decision to do so something seemed 'to move'. There was a sudden 'shift' in things, similar to that described by Hemingway when his hero, at a vital point in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* felt the 'earth move'. Suddenly the world receded and I found something going on which was more important than the prevailing 'reality' of the German counter-attack. There was probably great noise as well. Inside a tank, the noises of battle are muffled, even when firing one's own big guns. Outside, the firing must have been ear-splitting yet, in retrospect, a sort of silence prevailed. The visionary experience followed instantly, even as I remained aware of the continuing and threatening outer world.

The separateness of things disappeared and I knew that all things were of one 'stuff'. I had become part of a living tapestry of wonder and exquisite beauty. The mystery was all in the "I". As my small self seemed to recede, I thought, "how could I ever have thought that was me?" The tank battle and my small self, whilst still active, had seemingly retreated into insignificance. Words are inadequate to describe it. In the depth of my moment of wonderment I was overwhelmed by the fact that love prevailed and was beyond all evil. This perception was so clear to me that I couldn't understand why I hadn't known it all along. It was as if my

heart really knew it was always so. (That awareness gradually left me, but maybe one day I will know it again.)

Shortly after the experience, as the memory of it passed continuously through my puzzled mind, I recalled some schoolboy lines of poetry from Thompson's *In no Strange Land*.

O world invisible, we view thee.
 O world intangible, we touch thee.
 Cry, and upon thy so sore loss
 Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder,
 Pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross.

I sent home to my mother for a copy of Thompson's works and found, in *The Mistress of Vision*:

When to the new heart of thee,
 All things by immortal power Near or far,
 Hiddenly
 To each other linked are,
 That thou canst not stir a flower
 Without troubling a star.
 Search no more.....

Despite what I have said, during the time I stood on the back of the tank, as I was seeing things at that other level, I was evidently still functioning quite well. As the experience left me, shortly after I got down from our knocked-out tank and our incoherent Commander had been given morphia, I had a strong feeling that close by me was some invisible observer.

After Normandy I had two more mystical experiences but they were much more fleeting. In conclusion: I have looked into the hands of atheists, agnostics, behaviourists, reductionists and materialists and I have found them empty. I discovered that F C Happold, the author of "Mysticism" (Pelican) and other works was a man whose own interest in this topic derived from personal experience under fire in World War 1. In the introduction to his book, he states what I believe to be a great truth:

"Though he may not be able to describe it in word, though he may not be able logically to demonstrate its validity, to the mystic his experience is fully and absolutely valid and is surrounded with complete certainty. He has been there, he has seen, he knows."

Jack Geddes

Letters to the Editor

A reader suggested that I should encourage readers to respond to the content of our articles by way of a letters section. I'm sure there are many occasions where the content gives rise to disagreement or the need for amplification, correction or whatever. So, please speak up when the spirit moves. It might be that interaction is best offered by turning the NOWletter into a 'blog' but we tried that a few years ago that and it faded into inaction very quickly. Alan