

Meetings (3rd Sunday)
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Next Meetings – May 20
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Issue 73 –May 2001

Please note—NO GREVILLE ST. MEETING IN JUNE or JULY

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Editor's note

For some time I have been including an advertisement on the back page for meetings which are held on alternate Tuesdays for certain periods of the year at The Academy of the Word which is located under St Peters, Devonshire St., Surry Hills. The meetings are organised by Dr Alex Reichel in two streams and classified as "Healing & Wellbeing Forum" and "State of the World". The meetings alternate between the two themes. The titles indicate the subject matter of the talks and discussions, which fit well with our Dialogue and Nowletter interests. Some of us have been attending these meetings on and off for quite a long time. I always find them interesting and often very challenging. I have changed the format of our regular back-page announcement of Alex's meetings by including the titles of forthcoming talks and, in the hope of conveying the flavour of these get-togethers, I have shown some titles of past meetings as well. The meetings are followed by a rowdy dinner at the Shakespeare Hotel (optional but recommended).

There is an opportunity to meet Penny Fenner in July, see page 10. Unfortunately, I will be away and will miss the chance to confirm my belief that the Fenners have a very practical and direct approach to these matters. As advised in the last issue, there will now be a gap in deliveries until early August. Thanks to all contributors and keep the articles and letters flowing.

Subscriptions: Postal \$12 per annum, Email – Free

The Nowletter appears between 10 and 12 times every year and is a vehicle for news and views about awakening to what is really going on. Contributions from readers are considered the most valuable content so please think about letting me have your thoughts, experiences, discoveries and any responses to what you read here.

A Post-script for the Next World Saviour, from John Toler

Dear Alan, Thanks for the new issue. I suppose that the article, An Open Letter to the Next World Saviour by Hugh Garsden, doesn't really require comment, but I think it would be fun to do so.

I presume that Hugh assumes that the first "world saviour" was Jesus Christ, and not Mohamet, who exerted an enormous influence that reverberates around the world, loudly, even today, or the Buddha, who came before the other two and gained many more followers than either of the others, since the way he writes the article indicates this. (But I may be mistaken.) I think that, if such a Personage should appear, He would not be associated with any existing religion, or, as the Christ and the Buddha did, if He were at first, would soon introduce great changes.

(Like overturning money-changers' tables.)

However,

Some will even denounce you as the devil, the opposite of the saviour you claim to be.

Well of course. That's why they crucified Christ. (Perhaps you shouldn't print this, but I suspect president Bush would be the first to suggest it.) Almost all religious teachings, and most musical and literary masterpieces, were recognized only after the death of their progenitors. And I don't think any of them claimed to be "saviours". Though Christ said something like, "None can come to God except through me", this is capable of several interpretations.

Will you be a kindly, chaste, non-threatening holy one, a political and social revolutionary, a wrathful judge and redeemer, or an erudite wise-person?

Let's hope it will be the latter, foremost, and all the others too. But not necessarily chaste. It's debatable as to whether Christ was, and Mohamet certainly wasn't. (The Buddha's private life has been even more whitewashed than the other two, so we don't know about that aspect of him, though we know he had several prospective brides.) None of them were "non-threatening", and I don't think they considered themselves holy - their followers called them that. Christ said that he was the "Son of God", but he also said that we are all his "brothers", which means, in his eyes, we are all "sons of God".

To get us all onside you will have to satisfy everybody's pet obsessions and their causes.

I don't think so. A true world saviour should be able to readily show people that these obsessions and causes are, or are not, mistaken, so they would be quite willing to give them up or carry on with them, whichever should be the case.

You will be the most famous person of our time.

That's certainly not necessarily so. None of the other three I've mentioned, though they had large followings, were the most "famous" of their times. Both Caesar and the Pharaoh were more famous than Christ, for example.

Will you end war, murder, rape, pollution, starvation, AIDS, and all our other troubles?

Should he be expected to? None of the others did.

In other words, I consider Mr. Garsden to be a great romantic, which I'm not against, as I am also somewhat of a romantic I suppose, in other ways.

John Toler

Helping or Hindering? – from Gary Hipworth

Who am I *to think* that I can help anyone else with their suffering? Every time I think I can do something for anyone else in this way, I usually "stuff up".

Recently I was asked for some advice on the subject of self-realization and I blurted out some nonsense. It is so easy (and flattering) to be accepted as an authority. I agree with Lucian Loren-Rymaszewski's comments that Krishnamurti probably caused a lot of suffering. However, this is where I do throw the responsibility back to the person who is suffering to see if they can understand the whole process of human suffering in themselves.

I have enough trouble attempting to live peacefully on a moment by moment basis and if truth is now, then any motive on my part to help anyone else is coming from the past ie from memory. This is pure speculation, but perhaps Krishnamurti got into trouble because I suspect he had a very strong personal motive to "set man unconditionally free". The ego is a terribly cunning process and will use any excuse to continue its own existence. Krishnamurti's teachings did get me interested in discovering for myself whether they had any validity, but equally I was disturbed by his shadow life and lack of honesty in his dealings with those people who were closest to him.

At the end of the day I have to find out for myself if there is anything beyond the very, very limited human consciousness and what seems to be a mad, stupid corrupt world. I really am alone in this journey and I am kidding myself if I think anyone else is going to really be able to help me. Sure, anyone can comfort me but that is like giving a hungry person a drawing of a hamburger (or a veggie burger)

I cannot live anyone else's life on a moment to moment basis and life, every atom changes every moment. The one thing I have learnt about myself is that as soon as I have a motive to help anyone else (or myself, other than to listen to what the body's basic needs are) the thinker is born at the same time and begins to cause more suffering, not less, both in myself and in the external world.

I have also added to my conditioning more past tense knowledge in writing this article and we are both 'mugs' if we accept any of it as the truth. I can only hinder you, believe me.

Gary Hipworth

Kabir's Jar and Contents, from Enid Jenkins

Since contributions from readers are the 'most valued' here are some thoughts.

I'm a keen reader of the Nowletter and am delighted that Kabir (though he may not be a reader) contributed last month. He's saying, in his way, what John Wren -Lewis (I think) is saying in his way.

I'm a fan of John Wren -Lewis—as you know—and still thrill with the memory of the first time I heard of his NDE (near death experience). He did, after all, have the words to tell it. So I was interested to read what he had to say about Susan Blackmore's book. When I read her article—which I'm grateful to you for publishing—I saw nothing disturbing but simply pure scientific enquiry.

But then I could never understand how Darwin's hypothesis on evolution could offend those whose faith was founded on the book of Genesis. Darwin's theory no more devalues the Book of Genesis than the Book of Genesis devalues God.

What I did appreciate in John Wren-Lewis's article was his more thorough investigation. Susan Blackmore sees the brain as the touchstone. It seems to be her solid starting point. John Wren-Lewis questions its solidity. What is the brain, after all but a 'convoluted nervous substance' in the skull of vertebrates. (OED). As Susan Blackmore, writing from a Buddhist standpoint, would agree: what are we but a bunch of aggregates.

But the brain worries me. I know people with mighty powerful brains who are (in my opinion) 'mindless'. Do I know anyone who is mindful but has no brain? Is the brain necessary but not sufficient? Back to Kabir: to what extent did his jar experience depend on his having a brain? William Blake can say to the Worm 'Thou art my Mother & my Sister' but can the worm, poor, slithering, spineless thing, say it to William Blake?

Without mystical insights and without any scientific background and without—sadly—a good brain, I have only questions.

Perhaps I had better go to the Buddhists and cultivate 'no-mind'.
Or should I go to the worm?
Or perhaps a fellow reader can put me right?

Enid Jenkins

Facts & Fallacies Follow-up—from Ann Faraday

Dear Alan,

It's time to make closure on our Now letter exchange which started on New Year's Day 2001 when I made a resolution to try and contribute more directly to your publication. And since you requested comments on your list of fallacies (misunderstandings about enlightenment), this seemed a good place to start. But I quickly discovered that I didn't understand the darn things! What on earth, I wondered, were those cold-sounding, impersonal terms 'First and Second Natures or Perspectives' and "disidentification with ego" referring to? Nothing at all in my felt -experience. So I set about finding out.

It seemed to me that I might better understand the gist of your communication if I replaced the term First Nature (or Perspective) with the word "enlightenment," and the term "Second Nature" with the word "ego, or sense of separated self." I then rephrased and summarized your fallacies, and you said I didn't do too badly. But still nothing resonated with my own "no-self" enlightenment experience, nor with John's "eternity -consciousness." Nor with two dozen or so other enlightenment reports received from living Westerners during the decade of writing our book.

Most of these experiences were felt to be the result of Grace or crisis; former “glimpses” were often nothing like the final permanent radical Identity change; the old sense of self was completely eradicated (as Gary so nicely puts it, when you’ve lost your belief in Santa Claus, he’s just not part of your life any more); most were described as mind-blowing and out-of-this-world, some blissful, others calmer but always astonishing; what was felt to be missing before is now fulfilled; and no one, I feel sure, would have considered themselves greedy or ambitious in their search for the Beloved.

As for spiritual practices, some correspondents had spent years trying different forms of meditation or prayer, enjoying satsang with gurus and learning from teachers. All expressed profound love and gratitude to their mentors. Some had tried the headless-experiments. None could say what, if anything, had contributed to their openings. How could anyone possibly know? And since no one really understood how exactly they got there, any path at all seemed nonsensical, at least in our present ignorance of possible variables. What we clearly need is much, much more personal data before we can begin to make any pronouncements at all in this area.

John and I are off now to a long retreat at our far North coast hideaway, and hope to return home with our book completed. But with a title like The 9.15 to Nirvana, dare we send you a review copy, Alan?

Ann Faraday

Facts & Fallacies Follow-up—from Alan Mann

Thank you Ann, I think that tidies it up satisfactorily. I don’t feel we are very far apart and perhaps our differences arise from my view that emphasis on the “mind-blowing and out-of-this-world,” versions distracts us from the more common everyday revelation of the wonder, makes us think we’re missing something or that something is missing. I have just started to read Jan Kerschott’s book ‘Coming Home’ which includes an interview with Douglas Harding in which Douglas makes the following comment—capturing in a few words what I am clearly failing to communicate in my impersonal way.

Responding to Jan’s question about Douglas’s ‘Headless’ Himalayan and, by implication, all such experiences, Douglas says:

Well, it is not something special at all, but rather something natural. This is something that—when you see it—connects with everything. It is the revelation of the obvious not the achievement of the extraordinary.

That fits my experience perfectly. I am not denying mystical experiencing but I am saying that to aim for mystical experiencing is to overlook ‘what is’. I belong to ‘This is It’ school and if This turns up as mystical experiencing fine if it doesn’t—also fine.

Good luck with the book to which we are all looking forward with keen anticipation.

Alan Mann

As Simple as Making Contact, from Lyn Willmott

“There is thinking stuff from which all things are made and which, in its original state, permeates, penetrates and fills the interspaces of the Universe;”

As I read these provocative words written by Wallace D Wattles a hundred years ago a powerful, ecstatic realisation swept through me. Two months later it is still with me and I am at a loss as to how to describe it. No expression, no euphemism or analogy can relay to you the initial joy I experienced during that first profound contact, and which takes place each time I consciously activate it.

Contact. This is the only word I can use. Profound contact! Intelligent contact! Somehow through this subtle discovery - that the unconditional love I had been seeking for so long consisted of RECOGNISABLE INTELLIGENCE - a form of physical contact was made. This ‘thinking stuff from which all things are made’ consciously moved into me. Or more to the point, it probably was always there, and the words jumping off the page at me activated the love? Activated the recognition? This is only conjecture, what I do know is that if it has happened to me then it can happen to anybody!

This ‘all pervading intelligence’ lying within all things can be activated simply by allowing contact to be made. There is no need for a NDE (near death experience) or an OBE (out of body experience) or for something to knock you on the head, as has happened to so many people. Believe me when I say we humans live within a broad band of energy that gives and maintains life, and operating within this energy structure is a most sacred mind waiting to make contact. It would appear that all reality is simply veiled spirit, and once the heart is opened there no relevance to most of the questions that keep us so occupied. Questions indicate a lack of knowing; is there need to say more?

If you are reading this in absolute frustration because all you are being offered are words—try this. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. When fully relaxed use your imagination to feel around inside your head till you find an ‘on button’ up near your right temple. Pretend that as soon as you press this button you will open your mind and allow a full and total recognition of this loving intelligence to enter—then feel what happens next. Or if that doesn’t work, press the button so the floodgates open and you are awash with unconditional love. Another way is to begin to imagine opening yourself up completely, like a flower opening out to reveal its centre. Now gently press this open-self into the all-pervading intelligent-stuff in your head, or in your heart (wherever it feels right). Imagine this ‘stuff’ as soft and malleable so you can press the ‘self’ into it easily, and know that it is receiving you.

I know it is only pretending, but sometimes imagination can kick-start the real event. If you feel sceptical about this just remember, science does not understand the properties of imagination. No research has helped science understand these magical realms, yet imagination is an integral part of the right brain process and is responsible for much of human creativity.

If anyone wants to talk further—my email is: Lynewill@netspace.net.au

Lyn Willmott

The delusion of Time—by Donald Ingram Smith

I ask myself: Have I ever experienced any idea outside the dimension of time? And I wait listening. I realize that whenever I set up a goal and then work towards it I am creating, in my mind, the time needed to achieve it. So time-mind and clock-mind are tied together and are seen as one movement, have become the way in which my understanding of Life on earth has been formed. And hence, living is a sequential process along a line. Lateral thinking is the way we humans view everything. Yet strangely the only way I experience anything is in the present moment. There never was any time when my life was not this moment. In present awareness all situations are dealt with and all real actions happen.

Which poses the question: How can I be free in the future when freedom can only be now? I am already alive and change can occur only at an immediate point in the present. The situation I am in now is the outcome of previous mind-stuff. The problems facing me are mind-made: and traditional thinking affirms the belief that they can be mind-solved, which will, of course, involve time.

Ultimately living is not about resolving problems by a realization that what I am searching for is a projection of my present thinking (which is now my consciousness).

All goals are ideas, pictures conjured up by me or inherited, passed on from generation to regeneration and taken to be true. (otherwise why would I continue to hold them?)

It takes a quantum leap in consciousness to appreciate the simple fact that I am alive now, that I am attending to what I am doing, not with an outcome but with what is actually happening, and that this includes all: both challenges from the outside as well as my internal responses; and allowing both to run their course and go.

Awareness tells me all.

In times of crisis in life and death situations I am aware of another, altogether different state of mind, a stillness when there is no time to speculate or make ‘what is happening’ into a problem and then thinking about the means of its solution.

In a real crisis I either survive or I die. That heightened sensitivity is immediate and total awareness, it is that thrilling state of being that exists in all life or death pursuits. For instance: speed-car racing drivers or audacious adventurers scaling Mount Everest, individuals acting beyond thought, aware of exalted moments of time presence, free from all anticipation.

When there is no focusing on the future and no avoidance of the present there is an awakened aliveness in the moment, and the ending of time.

The only precious reality is NOW. The present is that immediate space in which my entire life unfolds. There never was a time when being alive was not now, a happening that was not in the present. All else is illusion and within the confines of my mind. There can in fact, be no awareness of either the past or the future.

My only access into the eternal-timeless is the ending of memory (what was) and speculation about what might happen (will be). The idea of me as a separate entity seeking self-survival through time is my last hope and ultimate delusion.

When I am no longer seeking permanency where it doesn’t exist; in transient events, in gain or loss, in special experiences, in the act of sex, in the old or the new, when I allow absolute change (which is transformation of consciousness) to happen in the ever changing, ever-ephemeral present—I find I am free, here and now.

Donald Ingram Smith

Joy Without a Cause—Rediscovering an Edwardian English Giant—by John Wren-Lewis

*I tell you naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher.*

*Night shall be thrice night over you,
And heaven an iron cope.
Do you have joy without a cause,
Yea, faith without a hope?*

G.K. Chesterton: The Ballad of the White Horse

The past decade has seen a world-wide rediscovery of G.K. Chesterton, who raised, in the first half of our century, a whole range of issues which have been recognised as important only today, over fifty years after his death. I have a special tale to tell about him here because I personally rediscovered him not long ago, before I knew anyone else was doing so, when a faint memory of something I'd read in my schooldays before World War 2 seemed to offer a clue to communicating my near-death experience in 1983. Following up that clue turned out to be quite an adventure in the manner of the detective-stories for which Chesterton himself is probably best remembered, and I eventually found he had actually anticipated several modern discoveries about death and dying, some of them in quite an astonishing way.

No-one could have been more surprised than I was by finding that Chesterton's writings were still of real interest. I hadn't even liked him at school, and in later years had totally dismissed him as a long-outdated literary hack who (I thought) attacked science and progress without understanding them, and spoiled even his detective stories by making them the excuse for perversely reactionary Church propaganda through the character of Father Brown, the priest-detective. I came from a home where religion meant the kind of dark superstition which made my mother believe quite literally in God striking a local workman blind for using the oath 'Gorblimey!'; and I turned to science with almost evangelistic fervour as the great liberator from such fear-ridden nonsense. The only reason I read Chesterton's books in the school library was simply that they were there, and I, from a home where 'reading' was a dirty word, devoured everything in print, like a starving man.

I particularly disliked one novel, a "supernatural thriller" entitled 'The Ball and the Cross', because it actually featured a scientist as its villain, and hinted by calling him Professor Lucifer, that the hidden motive force behind science was nothing less than diabolical. But it was an odd fragment from that novel which surfaced from the mists of memory when, in the weeks following my NDE in Thailand, I was struggling for words to express the extraordinary change of consciousness that had overtaken me and was apparently not going away.

I found myself suddenly understanding, from firsthand experience, what mystical writers of all religions have meant by knowing the world as divine, a creation streaming continually, moment-by-moment, from eternity. Yet precisely because religious terminology like this had meant nothing to me before, I was acutely aware that such language would almost certainly convey totally misleading impressions if I used it. Hunting around for simpler, more direct ways of expressing this extraordinary experience, my mind kept coming back to an incident near the end of 'The Ball and the Cross', and when I reached Australia I hunted high and low for a copy of the book to confirm my memory. It was two years before I found one, in the same old 1910 edition I'd read at school, and yes, there was the statement I was looking for.

It occurs when the hero, James Turnbull, anticipates James Bond in 'Dr. No' by using the ventilation system to break out of a fully automated solitary cell in which Professor Lucifer had imprisoned him. (Here, incidentally, Chesterton was also anticipating another issue which has become important only since his death. Lucifer had used his influence with the medical establishment to get Turnbull, an honest atheist, and a young Catholic opponent, certified as insane and committed to a private asylum because he knew it just wouldn't do to let the public know that anyone took religion seriously enough to fight a duel about it. This was more than fifty years before 'The Gulag Archipelago' in the USSR and Dr. Thomas Szasz in America showed how authorities could abuse mental health laws to put dissidents out of the way.)

Turnbull had been driven literally mad by his confinement—by the bare, hygienic square-tiled floors (with not even a beetle to befriend as in the crude dungeons of old), by the odd pointed shape of the cell, and most of all by a spike sticking purposelessly out of one wall. But when in a moment of lucidity from delirium he manages to break through into the next and identical cell, he finds another prisoner who, to his amazement, is not screaming but quietly singing. We, the readers, know this to be Father Michael, an old monk from the Balkans whom Lucifer abducted in his flying machine in the novel's prologue; after failing to convert him by argument to godless science, and furious at being repeatedly outwitted by the old man's simple logic, Lucifer had thrust him out on to the ball-and-cross above St. Paul's Cathedral in London, which gives the book its title. We have however lost sight of Father Michael since he negotiated the perilous descent to the street and got promptly arrested, long before Turnbull, for being mad in claiming to have come from a flying machine.

So has he too been driven truly mad by that monstrous cell? He greets the appearance of Turnbull's head through a hole in the wall with childlike pleasure, and responds to his enquiry about the cell in a way which isn't at all what our hero expected:

"Good place, yes," said the old man, nodding a great many times and beaming like a flattered landlord. "Good shape. Long and narrow, with a point like this," and he made lovingly with his hands a map of the room in the air.

"But that's not the best" he added confidentially "Squares very good. I have a nice long holiday, and can count them. But that's not the best"

"What is the best?" asked Turnbull in great distress.

"Spike is best," said the old man, opening his blue eyes blazing, "it sticks out".

That expresses the essence of my new consciousness better than a hundred theological terms—the discovery that things can be delightful even when the logic of ordinary life says they're horrible, because their delight consists simply in the fact that they are what they are. I don't stay in that state all the time, and am certainly not going to "tempt pr ovidence," as my mother would have put it, by claiming that this "joy without a cause" will persist for me even if I were to be thrown into solitary confinement, or subjected to great pain or great loss. But I can believe the mystics who've asserted that it has done so for them: even in my relatively calm life I've experienced this transformation of painful or nasty experiences in ways which make my mind boggle.

My astonishment at Chesterton's skill in going to the heart of mystical awareness was doubled, however, when I went back to read the novel again from the beginning and found something I'd completely forgotten—that in the prologue he'd shown Father Michael being thrust into that awareness precisely by a near-death experience—not a clinical one like mine, but the other kind where the mind faces an apparently certain death by accident or violence. In describing the old monk's state of mind as he clung to the cross high above London, Chesterton anticipated the findings of modern near-death researchers like Russell Noyes and Kenneth Ring in America and Margot Grey in England, that when the mind accepts death as certain, consciousness can sometimes change gear into "the eternal present". In Chesterton's words, "It is impossible to write" of the ultimate terror, but then it suddenly becomes a wonderful calm:

And of that ultimate resignation or certainty it is even less possible to write; it is something stranger than hell itself; it is perhaps the last of the secrets of God. At the highest crisis of some incurable anguish there will suddenly fall upon the man the stillness of an insane contentment. It is not hope, for hope is broken and romantic and concerned with the future; this is complete and of the present. It is not faith for faith by its very nature is fierce; and as it were at once doubtful and defiant; but this is simply a satisfaction. It is not knowledge, for intellect seems to have no particular part in it. Nor is it (as the modern idiots would certainly say it is) a mere numbness or negative paralysis of the power of grief. It is not negative in the least: it is as positive as good news.

Many of those phrases could come straight from the reports of modern near-death experiencers—"the stillness of an insane contentment... complete and of the present... simply a satisfaction...as. positive as good news." But even more impressive to me was Chesterton's description of the way Father Michael's whole perception of the world had changed when he learned, like the mountaineer who falls from a high cliff and lands on soft snow, or the pilot whose plunging plane suddenly rights itself, that death wasn't going to claim him after all. When, after a more than hair-raising descent, he finally emerged into the London streets—

He felt suddenly happy and suddenly indescribably small. He fancied he had been changed into a child again; his eyes sought the pavement seriously as children's do, as if it were a thing with which something satisfactory could be done. He felt the full warmth of that pleasure from which the proud shut themselves out, the pleasure that not only goes with humiliation, but which almost is humiliation...Everything his eye fell on it feasted on, not aesthetically, but with a plain, jolly appetite as of a boy eating buns. He relished the squareness of the houses; he liked their clean angles as if he had just cut them with a knife.

Those last two sentences jibe particularly with my own experience, for while my post-NDE consciousness sees wonder everywhere, it is yet in some inexplicable way totally ordinary—and while there is a feeling of humble gratitude for everything merely because I'm privileged to experience it, there is at the same time a paradoxical sense that it's all just as if I'd created it myself and can say, with God in the Book of Genesis, "behold, it is very good!"

Obviously my young mind must have passed over this part of 'The Ball And the Cross' as mere hyperbole when I read it the first time at school, or I wouldn't have just forgotten it: even the incident about the spike had survived in my memory only because, like the spike itself, it had "stuck out" as an oddity. So now, re-reading the descriptions after my own eyes had been opened by the NDE, I couldn't help wondering how Chesterton knew about this change of consciousness. Had he perhaps had some kind of NDE himself?

I vaguely recalled reading somewhere long ago that he'd once nearly died of a heart attack at Christmas (a not un common fate for those who let love of good food and wine make them hugely fat, as he did from quite an early age!) But when I consulted Maisie Ward's excellent 1945 biography of him, I found this close brush with death didn't occur until 1914, four years *after* he'd published 'The Ball and the Cross'—and there was no hint of any similar incident earlier in his life, either in Ward's book or in Chesterton's own autobiography, which was posthumously published in 1936, just after his

actual death. Like Father Brown, I felt my curiosity stirring, and that was when my rediscovery of Chesterton really got going.

I began haunting libraries, and one of my first discoveries—a surprise of a different sort—was that scholarly interest in him had revived so much in the past decade that a world-wide Chesterton Society had come into existence, with an Australian branch and a first-rate quarterly journal, ‘The Chesterton Review’, published from the University of Saskatchewan in Canada. This enabled me to read many of Chesterton’s journalistic articles that have never been published in book form, as well as reminiscences from people who knew him and details of his life and work unearthed by literary scholars in many countries, even such unlikely places as Japan.

My first hypothesis was that he might perhaps have been one of those rare human beings who seem to be born with mystical consciousness, though I’d found no hint of it in the autobiography. He undoubtedly had an artist’s eye for beauty in unexpected places—he once talked, in a BBC broadcast quoted by Maisie Ward, of experiencing “the mere excitement of existence in places that would commonly be called as dull as ditchwater,” and then added—in a manner absolutely typical of his style, “And by the way, is ditchwater dull? Naturalists with microscopes have told me that it teems with quiet fun.” But that is only a pale shadow of the kind of awareness attributed to Father Michael, and with which I’ve lived since the NDE.

And as my knowledge of Chesterton’s life and work grew, with growing admiration for him both as man and writer, I became more and more aware of one lifelong blindspot which eventually convinced me that his wonderfully accurate insight in ‘The Ball and the Cross’ wasn’t a product of firsthand experience at all. It seems, rather, to have been something which in its way is actually more incredible, a remarkable exercise of artistic intuition into an experience he hadn’t had first-hand, or at most had only touched. For while he was in most respects the most charitable of men, both in personal life and in controversy, he maintained to the end of his days an exclusive attitude to Christianity which involved condemning other kinds of mysticism as wrong or even evil, and from my own experience I simply can’t believe that anyone who has really known mystical consciousness firsthand could do that.

To take just one example, his detective story ‘The Wrong Shape’ introduces an Indian swami as a suspect mainly to give Father Brown an occasion to dilate on the fact that the eastern mystical notion of Nirvana, extinction, must necessarily breed an urge towards destruction. This is a view I would actually have shared in earlier days, for all my disagreement with Chesterton’s brand of Christianity, but in my NDE I experienced extinction, the No-thing-ness of Nirvana, the Great Dark, and it is precisely that which continues to be the source of “joy without a cause,” the consciousness which takes delight in spikes simply because they stick out. It is the absolute antithesis of destructiveness, as the story of Buddha makes clear: it is, rather, the very core of the Christian mysticism of which Chesterton writes with such magnificent intuition in his book ‘St. Francis of Assisi’;

The mystic who passes through the moment when there is nothing but God does in some sense behold the beginningless beginnings in which there was really nothing else. He not only appreciates everything but the nothing of which everything was made. In a fashion he endures and answers even the earthquake irony of the Book of Job; in some sense he is there when the foundations of the earth are laid, with the morning stars singing together and the sons of God shouting for joy.

In fact the conclusion I’ve reached after five years’ research into near-death experiences is that the reason why they can open people up, in various ways and to varying degrees, to mystical consciousness, is precisely that the moment of death is extinction—not of consciousness as such, but of separateness. Thanks to modern medical advances, more and more of us today are being privileged to return from that experience knowing, in another magnificent Chestertonian phrase, that deep down under all apparent pain and struggle, “joy is the uproarious labour by which all things live.” And while I doubt if mortal brains are capable of knowing any details of what happens to those who die instead of coming back, those who have once known that causeless joy also know that there is ultimately nothing else.

Chesterton saw this knowledge shining out of the lives of great Christian saints like Francis and Thomas Aquinas and simple ones like the parish priest on whom he modeled Father Brown, and he made it the faith on which he based his life. But because faith, as he shrewdly observed in the passage I quoted earlier, is “somehow at once doubtful and defiant,” he took Christianity as a crusade and almost wouldn’t let himself see (as later Catholics like Thomas Merton saw very clearly) that the same knowledge underlies the eastern religions when they urge practices like meditation in the hope of extinguishing separateness while alive. What interests me, however, is the fact that his poetic genius was somehow able to get beyond mere faith and intuit what knowledge of the ultimate joy must be like with such uncanny accuracy even without actual experience of it.

I believe this is the function of all great art (I find it especially in the music of Bach and Beethoven), and is one ground for hoping that with the new evidence coming from near-death experiences, humanity may one day—perhaps not too far hence—uncover ways to experience the ultimate joy which are less laborious than yogic disciplines and less dangerous than NDEs. That is now the overriding aim of my own studies, and in it I find Chesterton’s writings a continual source of inspiration.

John Wren-Lewis is a retired research scientist and professor of religious studies. The material in this article was originally broadcast on the ABC program 'Insights'.

*Western Australian Chesterton Society—<http://members.iinet.net.au/~jtb/gkcindex.htm>
The American Chesterton Society—<http://www.chesterton.org/>*

Why is there something and not nothing? — from Enid Jenkins

Did Wittgenstein really ask that question? Such a clever man, such a brilliant man asking a question too simple even for children, though I think it lies behind children's stretched-out wondering—Why did God make the world? Who made God? Big questions. Later they become more specific: why suffering? Why greed? Why war? Why me?

But Wittgenstein's question is for me the question to stop all questions. There is something. Not nothing. Why?

I look at my cat (a miracle in itself) and ask: why cat? She blinks in the sun. She likes the sun. Why? And why sun? Light?

An illusion, say the sages. Then why illusion? And if illusion, what is it illuding?

The seven veils of Salome, say the Sufis. One by one she discards them in her bewitching dance. Is she Maya? Maya whose temptations the Buddha resisted, so that he saw—nothing?

There seems to be an epidemic of enlightenment ('out there') these days. They say everything is fine. Underneath the corn is green. The tiniest, tiniest particles of "being" are doing their exquisite, ecstatic dance, each with its own consciousness, each one singing. Listen. The music of the spheres? No, the music of the universe delighting simply in being. To be: a verb without subject, without object. Just to be.

But why? Why isn't there, in ordinary parlance, nothing?

Not the Buddha's nothing, but our ordinary people's nothing.

I can't wait for an answer.

Enid Jenkins

(Dear Enid, I notice you didn't ask for the right answer so here is an answer. During Wittgenstein's spell at Manchester University someone mentioned his famous question to the Pennine, shepherd-poet Eddie Baigum who had no trouble with it at all and dealt with it in the dialect doggerel for which he is renowned. Ed.)

Why is there summat instead of nowt.

Is that what Ludwig frets about?

Well nowt cannot be without summat tha sees,

And summat can't be without nowt.

E. Baigum

Transparent Eyeball

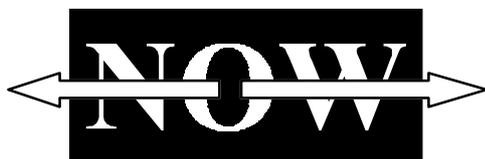
'To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says—he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me. Not the sun or the summer alone, but every season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorises a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to grimmest midnight. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life is always a child. In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.'

Emerson

Meetings Sydney

Academy of the Word Seminar Programme – Under St Peter’s church, Devonshire St., Surry Hills
Second Tuesdays 6.15pm - Healing & Well-being - **Fourth** Tuesdays 6.15pm - State of the World
 Dr Alex Reichel (02) 9310 4504

13 March	Spirituality, Psychology & Psychiatry	Prof Valerie Walkerdine
27 March	Between Time & Eternity: The search for harmony & wholeness	Dr Elizabeth Kasiro
10 April	Jungian Archetypes & Communication	Mary Heffernan
24 April	Love in Context	Lindsay Mell
8 May	Making Health Contagious	Prof. Stuart Hill
22 May	Medieval Mystics: Their relevance to the 21 st century	Dr Carmel Brendon Davis



**If unable to deliver please return to:
 81 Greville Street, Chatswood 2067
 amann@bigpond.net.au**

DIALOGUE MEETINGS				
LOCATION	DAY	MEETING PLACE	TIME & CONTACT	Phone Nos.
City	Third Saturday	Theosophical Society Level 2, 484 Kent St., City 81 Greville St. (off Fullers Rd)	2.30pm Terry O'Brien	02 9949 8379
Chatswood	Third Sunday	Chatswood	10.30 am Alan & Margot Mann	02 9419 7394
Clontarf	Fourth Sunday	49 Peronne Avenue Clontarf	11am Terry O'Brien	02 9949 8379
Nowra	First Saturday	The Tea Club, Berry Street, Opposite Roxy Cinema -	4-6pm Riche	4423 4774
Nowra	Third Sunday	3/117 Berry st., Nowra	11am Riche	4423 4774

