

George Schloss – Background

January 14, 2002

Dear Richard, About ten years ago I came across a book by a Morris Berman called *Coming to Our Senses* which, appropriately enough, just under the "heading" to chapter one bore a quote from another book called *The Hierarchy of Heaven and Earth* by someone named Douglas Harding. Curiously, though I was fairly current in the literature, I'd never heard of him. Because the passage is only a few sentences long and, as it turned out, had such an implosive effect on my own life, I'm going to repeat it here.

What happens when I look in my mirror is that I, who am nothing here, place myself there where I am a man, and project him back upon this centre. Now this is only a specially lucid case of self-observation in general; my glass does for me what my friends do, only with fewer complications ... What occurs everywhere obscurely occurs plainly here....Between us, the glass and I achieve a man.

And that was all. There was no mention of him in the text. He was not even listed in the index. But far from the customary chatter, its very concreteness a good omen, it was just enough to whet my appetite.

Since I live in Princeton and have access to the University Library, a copy of the abridged version of *The Hierarchy* was readily available. I say "readily available" advisedly because, though the abridged version had been published in the early fifties and this was the early nineties, it had been checked out exactly once. Now a lifetime's experience in the ways of the world, especially the "intellectual" world, has taught me that when a book that's been around for that length of time, particularly in one of our great centers of learning - the home to Einstein and others - and has been checked out only once in forty years there's a reason for it. It's either an exceptionally good book or one that's, well, maybe not so good and receiving its just due. Needless to say it didn't take me too long - maybe a chapter or two to recognize I was in the presence of something quite extraordinary.

Devouring it in three or four sittings, I immediately ordered a copy of *On Having No Head* which, when it arrived, I couldn't wait to begin. Since it represents such an important turning-point in my life, I can still picture the scene perfectly. It was a late Sunday morning and I was sitting in my bathrobe on the couch holding the book in my left hand and with my right attempting the first experiment I ever consciously performed, in this case the pointing finger or, as I've come to think of it, the magic wand which, indeed, it is. A creature of habit like so many of us, the first time round I completely missed it. I assumed I was pointing to my face which, of course, on present evidence I was not. Returning to the text for directions, I tried it again and this time I got it and got it in spades. I recognized almost at once that a search that had begun a half-century before and had included a brief flirtation with Catholicism, a lengthy pilgrimage through India and a short stint in Japan along with innumerable books and not so innumerable peak experiences, had come to a close, that I was enveloped, literally immersed in something of a revelation. Like the prodigal son who might have asked "Was this why I wandered the world over in body, mind and spirit only to end up here in the presence of mySelf?", I can also remember murmuring under my breath, and more in amazement than reverence, "O my God!" Little did I know.

Now in the sense that I'd finally found that what I'd been looking for had, in reality, been here all the time in the person of what I was looking *out of*, it might very well have signalled the end of the story. But, as I've written elsewhere regarding the "end of history", rather than finding myself at an end, as with history itself I discovered I was also at a beginning and a beginning which, quite in accordance with two-way looking and our all-too-human need for name-calling, may very well come to be classified as the Headless era. And if, hiding behind the all-embracing skirts of the experiments, this claim sounds too immodest, even too presumptuous for words, it's meant to. It's my conviction - and I'm quite serious - that because we've finally recognized who we are and from this conscious position can see that what obtains to each of us in microcosm is also applicable in macrocosm to the race itself, indeed to all creation, we can, now that all has been said if not done, for the first time in history afford to be too presumptuous for words. After all, if paradox is the name of the game and, as any experiment demonstrates, it is, this presumption might even, paradoxically, be taken for a sign of humility.

On the next to the last page of my copy of the Headless book was a note advising that further information was available from Anne Seward in Playford in Suffolk. I wrote, she responded with a list, I selected a few items, enclosed a check and proceeded to forget about it. Not about Headlessness, of course, or the experiments which I continued to return to - at least the few I knew about that could be practiced alone, that is to say in the presence of none other than my Non-other - but about the material I'd ordered- It wasn't until a few months later that in the U.K. on one of my frequent visits and coming across a copy of the newly-published *Head Off Stress* in the airport on the way home - and I can assure you it only served to re-ignite my commitment - I was reminded that, though my check had long since been cashed, I hadn't as yet received the print-outs and back issues of *Share It* I'd sent for. I hasten to add this was pure oversight on Anne's part and instantly remedied when, on my return to the States, I called her.

Now if I'm going into this in far too much detail, it's only because it seems to me a perfect example of what I've come to think of as "providential serendipity", serendipity being a word coined by Horace Walpole in the eighteenth century signifying valuable things not sought for. Recognizing that it says a great deal more about me than it does about him and I blush to admit it, but here I'd been already deeply affected by Douglas' work and maybe a hundred miles from where he lived and it never occurred to me once to get in touch with him. Not that I'd ever been that much of a camp-follower but, aside from the fact that I'd lived long enough to have had my fill of "gurus" (which, of course, as I was to discover, he distinctly is not). I wasn't about to intrude on the privacy of a man already in his eighties.

All I can say now is how mistaken I was, especially as regards this business of 'privacy.' Because as I was to find out, if there's one thing Douglas is not it's a "private" person. On the contrary, his life and work, dedicated to the total transparency that reveals the secret everyone knows anyway, have proven to be just the reverse and, in retrospect, I can only thank God for it. And Douglas, too, of course, and Anne for her oversight and the subsequent phone-call I would otherwise not have had to make. I still shudder to think of the alternative. Because it was on the strength of that phone-call that my own personal history, already come to an "end" by means of the meaning made explicit in the un-discovery provided by the experiments, was to begin anew on an altogether different plane. And here, if I may, is an example of how "providential serendipity" works or, at least in this instance, worked for me.

After accepting her profuse apologies, I mentioned in passing that I knew Playford where she lived quite well, that I'd been stationed for the better part of two years during the War at Martlesham Heath only a few miles away and that, though I'd been to England many times since, I'd never returned to the base but, having recently received an announcement that what was left of my old outfit was about to celebrate its fiftieth reunion, a plaque to be unveiled and the queen in attendance and so on, I was thinking of doing so. "Then you must come and visit him," she said and not only said but insisted. "Why don't you give him a call? I know he's home now because I just finished talking to him." So she gave me his number.

I called. We set up a time and a few months later following a day or two spent revisiting some of my former haunts in Woodbridge, Felixstowe and Ipswich I found myself at Shollond Hill. I knocked, he opened and we immediately greeted each other on a first-name basis. (And though this is not the place to go into it, that too, in my view has its significance when weighed in the great scale-pan of custom and history). I also handed him a large package I'd seen leaning against the door which, as it turned out, contained the final proofs of *The Trial*. When he groaned - and for all the radiant lightness of its content it was a heavy damn thing - I mentioned that inasmuch as I'd been an editor in one of my past lives I'd be glad to run through it with him. Apparently it was an offer he couldn't refuse because instead of spending just the one night as planned, I stayed for the balance of the week. No need to imagine what a delight and privilege that was, not only to go over that seminal book word for word, but to be able to share and compare notes with its author. Incidentally, prior to leaving I learned that someone else was due to arrive shortly, a lady he'd recently met in Paris also on her first visit. Her name was Catherine.

I don't want to go on too long. Suffice it that I attended my first organized gathering that fall in Montreal where, accompanied by Judy, Douglas kicked off his annual progress from east to west in this hemisphere. Aside from the obvious benefits of sharing with the like-minded or even the not so like-minded, it was a marvelous opportunity to go through some of the experiments that, as with the Foursome, the Machine, the Circle, require more than one or two people to make their point. Though, as Douglas is fond of emphasizing, any way home is the right way home and, as a result, any one experiment will do to reveal who we really really are, nevertheless, when it comes to my particular area of concern, to illuminating this or that aspect of human existence not only as experienced singly but in its so-called collectivity - that elusive and illusive "we" he talks about in *The Science of the 1st Person* - some experiments are more equal than others. In any case, though I've since attended many, many workshops, both here and in England and France and on a small scale have even conducted a few of my own and though I've also been a guest in his house many, many times just as he, from time to time, has been a guest in mine and each occasion has offered an opportunity to at once confirm and deepen my commitment I have never veered, not for one instant, from my first response to the initial invitation I received that Sunday morning: that the pleasure of my company was being requested at an epochal event.

Which brings me, finally, to specific material you ask for your proposed biography. Though, like many of us I do know something of the inevitable gossip, the ins and outs and ups and downs of little Douglas' life, it's nevertheless a project that's worth undertaking and must and should be undertaken while the details, the names and dates and all that goes along with them, are still available straight from the horse's mouth. Certainly it's a book I look forward to reading. As to what I in particular might contribute to your research over and above what I've already mentioned in passing - I've been thinking about that. Hence my delay in responding to your request for information.

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For me it all boils down to one essential question. What has been central to my experience of Douglas that, commensurate with his epochal achievement - and I have to insist on that - might be of interest to the world? I suppose I could begin by listing the many personal qualities I'm sure you and others will note as well, qualities made obvious not only to me but to the seemingly endless stream of visitors through his house and the innumerable attendees at workshops: his courtesy and patience, his openness and generosity, above all his supreme intelligence. I'm sure that those of us who've met him in the flesh and maybe even those who haven't could add to the list and throw in, for good measure, some I've omitted. But though all that goes without saying and in themselves would be more than enough to insure a valued friend. as far as I'm concerned it's still not of the essence. After all, there've been many people - well, if not many at least a few, enough at least to keep the world right-side up - who, from time to time, have exhibited courtesy and patience and intelligence and all the rest but that still doesn't add up to the experiments, to the give and take of two-way looking.

Because in my view the experiments are the key not only to his work but to a life which seen from the outside might otherwise have revealed a dangerous integrity bordering on unholy ambition had it not been redeemed by these "heavenly" instruments he was then impelled by their very nature to share with us. Now I realize I may be treading on delicate ground here - his early rupture with his family, for instance, echoing, at least to some degree, an earlier "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" - but in the final analysis (which is what the experiments are all about) that's not the issue. The issue is the truth.

I've already mentioned his transparency. And certainly it's no small thing and reveals something of the awesome power implicit in the experiments that the realization of his "glassy essence" has not only brought so many of us together who would otherwise not have met but has served as a conduit, a medium through which each of us can in turn, if we so desire, realize our own. But as I've written elsewhere as regards the nature of apocalypse - its essential meaning no more nor less than "an unveiling, an uncovering" - with history itself now coming to an end, not in the way expected, of course, but the only way possible, and with its purpose fulfilled by means of these simple instruments, as with each of us individually this is only a beginning. It's my contention that what distinguishes the experiments and, by extension, Douglas, from anything that's come before is not only their all-inclusiveness but their and his essential anonymity. As in the Unclassified, to invoke the experiments is to call upon the name of that which shall remain nameless, namely the voice of silence, Godspak. And though, as regards their implications, I have yet to detect one false note in anything he's ever said or written about them, their absolute truth depends neither on what he says nor does but only on that they are. And I know of no other guides to the nature of reality - and that includes the founders of the great religions and the great spiritual teachers, the sages and saints and seers - of whom that can be claimed. Were it otherwise, especially in this "democratic and scientific" age, it would represent not only the mixture as before but an intolerable lapse into an idolatry and hagiography that has bedeviled us from the beginning of time and which, of course, he instantly and justifiably rejects. And should the day arrive when there are some who don't reject it - and stranger things have happened ("Why call me good when only God is good?") - we now know, thanks to two-way looking, that as the unique Subject of the equal opportunity universe that inhabits us, either all of us have the credentials to identify ourSelf and the where-with-all to prove it, or none of us do. By the same token, that it's been granted to Douglas to become the vessel through which I, for one, have been given back this gift of mySelf would be a debt almost impossible to repay were it not for the testimony of the experiments themselves. But I do repay it and

so do we all with the knowledge and assurance - and never so apparent as in a paper-bag - that, whether in Nacton or at a workshop or anywhere else, as his guest I am at the same time necessarily his host and so, paradoxically, in this reciprocal interchange of absolute inequality we meet as equals. And that, too, is the meaning of our time. I dare say of all time.

May 12, 2006

Dear Alan, As regards your request please find enclosed prints of a couple of snapshots taken a year or so ago, one of which you may or may not be able to use, a copy of a letter I wrote to Richard some four years back and since I'm not at all sure it will be suitable if only because of its length, a brief introductory run-down of my career, such as it is, as it pertains to Headlessness.

As for any biographical material you might want: Interestingly enough (and who knows? maybe significantly too) not only did my so-called spiritual search end at Shollond Hill where Douglas has lived for almost sixty years now, it also began there or, at least, thereabouts, at Martlesham Heath only a couple of miles away, a British air-base we'd taken over and where, beginning in early 1943, I was stationed for the better part of two years. Though it's now generally conceded that the tide had turned by then, what with the continuing air-raids and buzz-bombs - and never so apparent as on a day-off generally spent in London - and the continuing specter of an imminent excursion to the Pacific, it was still possible for a guy to get killed over there which, as Dr. Johnson remarked about hanging, has a wonderful way of concentrating the mind even in one so young.

At any rate, since my interests were largely literary and philosophical, I naturally gravitated towards Watkins Bookshop off Charing Cross Road and Luzac's near the British Museum which, hard as it is to believe, were just about the only places you could even begin to find material - and that usually imported or second-hand - we can now pick up in paper-back in virtually any bookshop, not to speak of super-market, in the land. And I'm not referring to a Plato now or an Aristotle or even an Augustine or Aquinas, all of whom I'd had at least a nodding acquaintance with from college, but of work related to Zen or Sufism, for instance, neither of which I'd ever even heard of before, nor had anyone else I knew. Just as an interesting side-light and to indicate how times have changed - I can remember that as late as 1951, soon after the war, having attended a lecture on Zen that Suzuki had given here at Columbia University in New York, I still had to wait a few months to receive a couple of his books I'd ordered which, though written in English, were only available from Tokyo.

In any case, though I did dabble here and there, I consider my first real introduction to what I was later to learn was the essential material, came from, of all people, Aldous Huxley whose *Perennial Philosophy*, a wonderful little anthology with commentary I'd picked up, thinking it was a novel, on one of my trips to London and which I still own. What was so important for me was not primarily the text - startling as that was - but its marvelous bibliography and concomitant introduction to those mysterious names I'd never even heard of before, names like Rumi or Dogen offering their promise, not so much of the discovery as the uncovering of the Land of Heart's Desire.

Since I want to keep this short, I'll compress what turned out to be a post-war search of almost thirty years into a few sentences and which, under the early influence of the well-known Trappist convert, Tom Merton, included a brief, a very brief sojourn in the Catholic Church, a lengthy pilgrimage through India, a short stay at a Zen monastery in Kyoto, innumerable "peak" experiences, some even soberly induced but all seasoned with the salt of hundreds, maybe even thousands of books (and the best books, too, I might add) and all of which ended, fittingly enough, in the one thing necessary at the time, at least for me - a drunken booze-induced and total despair. It was only then that coming into A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous) and what I now consider an entrance into what used to be called the Lesser Mysteries that I began to make what can now generously be called anything like "head-way" till some twenty years later, at almost seventy, I lost even that and stumbled onto Douglas' work and the experiments. How, since I was conversant with just about everything else in the field, I'd missed him all those years as well as what I now consider my entrance into the Greater Mysteries I have no idea but for whatever reason (and maybe even none) it turned out to be providential. A brief visit to Shollond Hill on my way to a fiftieth reunion at Martlesham, a workshop a few months later in Montreal and I was off and running and have never stopped. The rest, as they say, is history - 1st Person History.