

## **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 I hadn't even liked him at school, and in later years had totally dismissed him as a long-outdated literary hack who (I thought) attacked science and progress without understanding them, and spoiled even his detective stories by making them the excuse for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 providence,' 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 uncommon 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.

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