

Book Review by John Wren-Lewis, University of Sidney

The Little Book of Life and Death by D. E. Harding with a Foreword by Ram Dass. New York & London: Arkana. 1988, 150pp.

Major advances in human understanding almost always come from questioning a supposedly obvious truth which everyone takes for granted, and that is why I strongly recommend this book to everyone interested in near-death studies. It calls into question a whole range of common assumptions about life and death, prompting noted thanatologist Ram Dass to proclaim in his Foreword that 'after this gift, the literature on dying will never be the same again'. And while NDE's are only touched upon quite briefly towards the book's end, they are dealt with from a perspective which differs radically from any of the approaches I've yet seen - a perspective which differs radically from any of the approaches I've yet seen - a perspective which I believe could be the clue to significant new discoveries in the field.

Perspective is a topic integral to D. E. Harding's original profession of architecture, in which he graduated from the University of London in the years between the two World Wars, but in his thirties he began to apply the principle of perspectival flexibility to the whole of life in quite radical ways; he became a champion 'lateral thinker', offering a fundamental 'paradigm-shift' in the understanding of human consciousness, two decades before either of those now-overworked (and usually misunderstood) terms was invented. Inevitably, almost no-one grasped what he was after when he published his first book, *The Hierarchy of Heaven and Earth*, in England in 1952; I myself was amongst the uncomprehending then, and wrote him off as just another rather weird religious propagandist, never dreaming that a quarter of a century later the book would be republished as a classic by a prestigious American university press (Harding, 1979; for a full review of this remarkable work, see Wren-Lewis, *Share It* 11.)

In 1961 he tried again, with a much shorter book which attracted attention by its koan-like title, *On Having No Head*; and by then, thanks to the growth of the Human Potential Movement with its demand for new approaches in psychology, a discerning few were ready to pay attention. (One was Professor Huston Smith of Minnesota, doyen amongst contemporary philosophers of religion, who later wrote a laudatory Introduction to an updated edition of *On Having No Head* (Harding, 1986); I, alas, remained uncomprehending. In the 1970's Werner Erhard of EST picked out Harding as a visionary thinker of global importance and sponsored a world tour for him, in the wake of Buckminster Fuller, while British historian Anne Bancroft included him alongside such figures as Martin Buber, Teilhard de Chardin, G.I. Gurdjieff, Thomas Merton and Ramana Maharshi in her book, *Twentieth Century Mystics and Sages* (Bancroft, 1976.) By the time he came to write *The Little Book of Life and Death* at age 79 - a very personal preparation for his own death, which he then, not unnaturally, assumed could happen at any time simply from fullness of years - he enjoyed the rare distinction of having been acclaimed a genius by leading scholars around the world while also featuring in the pop music charts (in 'The Douglas Harding Song,' performed by the British group The Incredible String Band.)

And perhaps that last distinction is the most truly appropriate for terms like 'mystic', 'sage' or 'genius' fail to do him justice - or, more accurately, tend to do him injustice because of their usual associations. His aim has always be demystification, and whereas a genius or a sage would normally be expected to purvey learning, he employs his own very considerable learning to encourage unlearning of common, deeply-ingrained mental habits which he believes to be not just profoundly misleading, but actually life-destroying. He makes the extraordinary claim that most human anxieties, including fear of death, are not natural and inevitable at all, but the result of completely unnatural limitations imposed on consciousness by social brainwashing, passed on from generation to generation by parental and other training from the dawn of human history. Yet far from being a propagandist for religious or mystical belief, as I used to think, he sees most such belief, including New Age belief in 'higher consciousness', as itself part of the brainwashing, because it accepts ordinary everyday consciousness as a function of individual personality, *when in fact separate individuality is only a mental assumption like grid-lines on maps, not part of real experience at all.*

In fact he takes Gautama Buddha's paradigm of separate-consciousness as illusion more seriously than most Buddhists have ever done, emphatically denying that liberation from the anxieties and 'cravings' of that illusion requires years of spiritual discipline. The illusion arises, he maintains, simply because we've been trained since infancy to *interpret* our conscious experience, moment by moment, in terms of self-images based on the way other people experience us in social relationship - i.e., as erect-standing, talking and thinking animals. His books—including two new ones produced since his anticipation of dying soon after 80 has been proved premature (Harding, 1990 & 1992)—are constructed around various simple 'mental de-briefing exercises' to enable readers to side-step this interpretation-process and *really experience their experience*. The result, he insists, is instant realisation that separate individuality is *just one special perspective in a living consciousness which is literally infinite, not the victim of time but the eternal theatre in which time happens*. And if taken seriously, this is no mere intellectual intuition, but the actual discovery of an unsuspected, yet really obvious, depth-dimension in consciousness itself, which subsumes conflict and fear into equanimity and love.

It is from this standpoint that he views the findings of modern near-death research: he sees both the deep tranquillity which characterises most NDE's themselves, and the positive life-changes that usually follow them, as evidence that at the close approach of death, societal conditioning loses its grip and consciousness is able to experience its infinite, eternal reality. In other words, he sees encounter with death as a decisive, albeit somewhat drastic, unlearning process - and my own ability to appreciate Harding dates precisely from having experiences such as un-learning myself when I nearly died from poisoning in 1983. The event itself (Wren-Lewis, 1985) had none of the heavenly visions that commonly attract most attention in NDE accounts; it was, quite simply, an experience of timeless and infinite aliveness, pure absolute consciousness with no 'selfness' whatever, which *focused down* into the bodymind perspective called John Wren-Lewis when the doctors resuscitated my brain. Ever since then I've been directly aware that I'm not, *and never was*, an isolated individual experiencing an alien environment. I am, *and always was*, Infinite Eternal Aliveness playing something like a game called 'John Wren-Lewis-ing' in a universe which is also That.

The terms are abstract and metaphysical, but the awareness itself is so vividly concrete that for the first few months I was often impelled to put my hand up to the back of my head, feeling for all the world as if the doctors had opened up my skull to the dark infinity of space - not just the space of astronomers, which is simply another special perspective, but the infinite consciousness that is the inside story of all possible universes, which Harding calls 'a dark which is the brilliance of a thousand suns'. With hindsight I'm quite surprised I didn't recall Harding immediately, but in 1983 it was more than twenty years since I'd read or thought about him, and I was pretty preoccupied with adjusting to this astonishing new perception of life. When I came to write my story down for publication, the thought did briefly flash across my mind, 'Could *this* be what that strange chap Harding meant all those years ago about having no head?' But his books weren't readily available in Australia, and I didn't even know if he was still alive, so I didn't pursue the subject. Then, in 1989, he read an account of my experience somewhere and wrote, out of the blue, sending me a copy of the just-published *Little Book of Life and Death* for comment. Needless to say, my first response was an apology for not getting his point until life forced it on me the hard way.

Like Ram Dass, I found the book 'a delight', especially fascinating for me because it raised directly the very issue about which I'd been puzzling off and on for six years: if, as I'd now discovered, the sense of alienated human individuality is just an illusion, are there less drastic ways of unlearning it than dicing with death? Harding puts his own contention in his own distinctively humorous fashion: why wait for, and risk, an NDE he asks when you can at any time have a PDE (Present Death Experience) simply by following the advice of the medieval Chinese sage Huang Po and observing things as they are instead of believing what you've always been told about them? Harding then reiterates his classic 'No Head' exercise: if you actually look at your experience, you'll find you've already undergone one of the most reliable processes for ensuring death of the self, namely decapitation, because in actual experience there's nothing above your shirtfront but the world presenting itself; your head is something you only think is there as the centre of your consciousness because you've been conditioned to identify yourself with what you see in mirrors or photographs. just take this

experience really seriously as the basis for living, he urges, and you already have enlightenment; you don't have to find eternity, because you've never really been without it, and never could be.

Ah, but there's the rub - taking it seriously enough to make it the basis for life. To me now, eternity-consciousness is absolutely and undeniably obvious, just as Harding insists, but my failure to get his point for all those years wasn't just superficial prejudice, that age-long brain-washing into alienated individuality caused the separate-self perspective to snap back into place no matter how faithfully I tried to do his exercises, leading me to conclude that he was just playing with words to put across a mystical belief. In 1991 I had the chance to quiz him on this point when he visited Australia to promote his new book on overcoming stress (Harding, 1990), for which he was himself the best possible advertisement; an octogenarian breezing effortlessly through a crowded cross-continental schedule of lectures, workshops and media interviews which most people half his age would have found punishing. I asked him how many people he'd found, over the years, who could open to the eternity experience and remain open just by doing his exercises, and he readily agreed that 'taking experience

seriously' was the problem. Even he himself, he said, had needed years of practice, but he insisted - and I readily allowed - that this kind of practice is an altogether different kettle of fish from most spiritual disciplines, which are undertaken on the basis of faith and belief rather than direct and simple observation.

So my own hunch is that we need more research, yet, on the detailed 'psychodynamics' of 'un-enlightenment' in so-called normal consciousness and that's now my own life-work (Wren-Lewis, 1992 & 1993) But in the meantime, I cannot recommend Harding's work too highly; however limited the practical success of his exercises (and you may have better luck than I did), they are for my money the only serious game in town at the moment, and I'm sure his paradigm of consciousness is the key to the future, not just in near-death studies but for the whole of psychology and behavioural science (see, e.g., Faraday, 1991)

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