

# *Editorial*

## And let the darkness . . .

Stephen G. Wright

*'I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you which shall be the darkness of God.' Eliot (1944, p. 16)*

### Behind the screens

We teeter always on the existential edge. At any moment our quietly ordered lives can fall apart as we are robbed of all those things in which we invest certainty. Like thieves lurking in the night, the forces of chaos are ever present, waiting for the right moment to slip behind and mug us of our precious possessions. I witnessed this recently after a delayed flight to Australia when, veering between resignation and fury, my fellow passengers sought to handle the countless disorders, missed moments and scuppered plans that now filled our lives.

The shambles at the airport mirrored the chaos into which my own body slipped a week later, when an unlooked-for health problem laid me low, dangerously low, and I found myself in the Cairns Hospital emergency department. Far from home, exhausted, sick – I watched my fear shifting ground constantly as the twin poles of the terror of non-existence and the humour of the ridiculous vied for authority. At some points as I felt my body giving way and my heart failing I was plunged

into a gut-stuck tremble, at others I lay there thinking of the utterly futile, like 'If I die and have to be sent back to England in a box, will somebody remember to cancel the meals on the plane?' or 'Have I got clean underwear on?' (Mother, oh dear mother – what memories you have left me with!) I was helpless and facing the helplessness and sometimes, during the long wait as machines clicked and hummed to tell me more than I knew myself of my own inner workings, quietly furious with God for letting me down. The possibility of death after decades of joyful and painful conscious spiritual awakening seemed damned unfair – I wasn't ready to die; it just wasn't in the plan.

And I also reflected on another aspect of this health crisis – I was not surprised. For weeks before I had been having strange and disturbing death dreams. The lecture tour, when requested over a year before seemed like a good idea at the time, but as the moment of travel drew closer, a steady and increasing series of mishaps occurred – emails going astray, arrangements falling through, problems arising one after another.

Moments of prayer and contemplation were spiked with grim words and imagery. I had an overwhelming urge to make out my will, settle some affairs and phone the kids to say I loved them – all of which I did. And when people said ‘You must be looking forward to it.’ I said, or thought, ‘My heart is not really in it.’ – words that rang with many meanings as I stared at the erratics on my monitor in the emergency room with the madness and distress of a busy department roaring around me. Somehow I knew there was something I had not paid attention to here, something missed, yet something inevitable and unavoidable.

My inner struggle was not mirrored in the affectionate discipline of my doctors and nurses who were universally kind, attentive and practical. They were superb chaos managers – keeping all those forces of disorder, inside and outside my body, at bay by the quiet concentration on what needed to be done. One nurse with an unusual degree of spiritual intelligence held my gaze and said, ‘You need to be alone don’t you? This kind of place doesn’t lend itself to quietness, but I can tell you need some time to make sense of it don’t you?’ I was astonished by her sensitivity, not to say possible telepathy, and her practical response of shooing people away, partially drawing the screens to permit observation without obtrusiveness, leaving me to drop within.

It was then that a loneliness came upon me, the intensity of which I had never known before. Something deep and dark overwhelmed me as I passed from rage at God to suddenly feeling the absence of God. Despair welled up. A feeling like drowning. An absence of breath. A lifeless, hopeless void. In this interior shadow I could ‘see’ only one thing: a great black hole that was growing bigger by the second and turning into a vast vortex. Whirlpool-like it was drawing me in, to a place beyond terror, for this was death and it was headed my way and

there was nothing I could do about it and I was on my own and God had left me and I didn’t know which if any of these frightened and desolated me most.

## Waiting for God

This journal is now completing its 7th volume and it is time for me to let go of the editorship. I promised (who?) some nine years ago that I would see this through to the seventh volume and we have passed through several publishers and many ups and downs. Now, with the stability and professionalism that John Wiley Publishers offers, I feel confident of letting it go, retreating to the back benches of the editorial board and handing over to my very capable and experienced colleague Prof. Harald Walach. He has recently moved to the UK from Germany and is a man who successfully integrates science and spirituality, the personal and the professional.

Often in my editorials I have sought to weave the twin perspectives of the accumulating evidence of spirituality’s significance to well-being with my own personal experiences, my notes along the journey. By chance, if chance it be, I had taken my laptop to Australia, thinking that I might get some inspiration for my last editorial – little did I know, or thought I knew.

It is difficult to talk of spirituality without bringing God into it, not just because personally God is very real to me but also because God and spirituality are so intimately bound up with each other. Some faiths, such as Buddhism, are not God centred, and there is no evidence that a belief in God per se is necessarily linked to better health any more than not believing in God makes us more prone to ill-health. What seems to matter at least is that we believe in something, as the research explored in these pages down the years indicates. While we may view research and other scholarly endeavour in the field as

evidence of the significance between spirituality and health, I have never yet read any research that proves the existence of God; for that I must rely on my own intuition, my reasoning, my experience and I have come to trust all these three in myself down the years. All this and the infinite record of countless human beings who report knowing that a certain, many-named yet indefinable Something is in all things yet contained by none.

Yet, as we have also noted in this journal, the experience of the transcendent, the expanded reality (the real reality), God, is explained by one or more of many possible options, and McGrath (2004) supplies a succinct summary of the philosophical standpoints. For Marx, God could be put down to an 'opium' to dull the pain of an unjust world and an instrument to keep people under control; God was a neurosis, according to Freud, arising from the need for a father figure; in Feuerbach's case God was an invention to distract from (and console us in) the sorrow of the world. Sartre put the desire for God down to our own desire to be God and so God was invented for us to find our own meaning in the world. More recently studies have suggested that we are 'wired' for God (Newberg et al., 2001) or that we are genetically programmed to connect with the divine (Hamer, 2004). Through an evolutionary process of selection, belief in a deity overcame the fear/despair of living and thus provided an advantaged survival, passed on down the generations. Physiologists meanwhile have long suggested that the mystic, ineffable experience is a product of an outpouring of serotonin or endorphins in the nervous system or a product of electrical discharges in temporal lobe epilepsy (an accusation frequently thrown at Florence Nightingale for example (Dossey, 1999)), while others affirm that it can be drug induced (Badiner and Hunt, 2002). Personally, I've always thought the 'God as

comforter' theory a bit lame – anyone who has consciously set out into spiritual awakening and in search of the source of all will tell you that comfort is a very rare experience – quite the opposite in fact. Seeking God takes us to the limits if we are serious about it, and the limits are often painful as well as joyful.

As to drugs, I can certainly agree from my hospital experience that there is something to be said for the drugs. As I slipped effortlessly into unconsciousness while the white liquid slipped equally effortlessly down the intravenous line, I recall feeling 'this is just like God' as the anaesthetic and relaxant took hold. That same bliss swept over me that I have felt so many times before as I have fallen into mystical union. And another thought came: that underlying addiction (to drink or drugs) there may be that same desire to fill the empty space, to drown out the pain of existence, to seek the rapture that paradoxically is readily available within if we (learn) to receive it.

As Paul Tillich observes, belief in God or something else is what holds at bay the unconscious fear of non-existence. He writes: 'The anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of meaning which gives meaning to all meanings. The anxiety is aroused by the loss of a spiritual centre, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence' (Tillich, 2000, p. 47). As I lay in that emergency room, a collapse into uncertainty, anxiety and meaninglessness was more painful than anything that was going on with my body. Nurses kept apologizing for sticking needles in me or for scraping off my chest hair and all the other pokings and proddings – but I have no memory of physical pain. I have a memory of watching everything happening, feeling everything happening, but in some oddly detached way as if it was happening to some stranger who was yet vaguely familiar to me –

that 'haven't I seen you before somewhere?' feeling. Even the fear which swirled around between body and mind neither possessed nor was possessed by me. Some 'I' was experiencing it all, in a way that was curiously interesting even though death was stalking around – an uninvited and invisible though not necessarily unwelcome guest. But then the drugs took hold, and oblivion ensued.

## **We have the meaning because we have the experience**

So that's it then. Based on the previous discussion, God is just a product of a twitch in the nervous system. Yet in seeking to explore scientifically the numinous experience, many of the approaches are remarkably unscientific or at least demonstrate the blinkered effect of seeing the world through a particular lens that shuts out other possibilities. As McGrath (2004) notes, the firmness in atheist beliefs is itself suspect, for the only rational belief to adopt is agnosticism. 'Belief that there is no God is just as much a matter of faith as the belief that there is a God' (2004, p. 180) – just as the existence of God cannot be proved, neither can it be disproved.

I love science. It is really useful. I like drugs, ECG machines, aeroplanes, roads, water supplies and countless other things in life that work because of science. But enter the realms of spirit, and the uses and claims of science begin to look a little frayed around the edges. The will for power of many in modern science, however it is dressed up (to know everything, to be certain, to find a solution), is sometimes rooted in very reductionist views of human beings, and a very irrational attachment to a faith position (that there is no God) is every bit as 'irrational' to the faith position that there is. The scientific creed (and I use the word creed advisedly for it is just as absolute as any religious creed) goes something like this:

*'I believe in a single substance, the mother of all forces, which engenders bodies and the consciousness of everything, visible and invisible.*

*I believe in a single Lord, the Human Mind, the unique son of the substance of the world after centuries of evolution: the encapsulated reflection of the great world, the epiphenomenal light of primordial darkness, the real reflection of the great world – evolved through trial and error, not engendered or created, consubstantial with the mother substance – and through whom the whole world can be reflected. It is he who – for we human beings, and for our use – has ascended from the shadows of the mother-substance.*

*He has taken on flesh from matter through the work of evolution, and he has become the Human Brain.*

*Although he is destroyed with each generation that passes, he is formed anew in each generation following, according to Heredity. He is summoned to ascend to comprehensive knowledge of the whole world and to be seated at the right hand of the mother-substance, which will serve him in his mission as judge and legislator, and his reign will never end.*

*I believe in Evolution, which directs all, which gives life to the inorganic and consciousness to the organic, which proceeds from the mother-substance and fashions the thinking mind. With the mother-substance and the human mind, evolution receives equal authority and importance. It has spoken through universal progress.*

*I believe in one diligent, universal, civilising Science. I acknowledge a single discipline of the elimination of errors and I await the future fruits of collective efforts of the past for the life of civilisation to come. So be it.' (Anon, 1991, p. 212)*

This somewhat tongue-in-cheek creed epitomizes some of the hypocrisy of much of

contemporary science – believing itself to be rational and objective, yet deeply rooted in its own articles of faith and dogmas. It says something too about the egocentrism of human beings – placing ourselves at the centre of the universe and the creative process, of all that is known and knowable, of an essentially materialist and quantifiable cosmos with no room for mystery or the possibility of creative and conscious forces at work, which may be beyond those produced by the human brain. In claiming to be the *summum bonum* of human endeavour, it omits one significant human quality – humility. As Pannenberg notes, ‘Man’s freedom requires a religious basis. Freedom only grows from participation in absolute truth, from the human being’s bond with the divine mystery in life’ (Pannenberg, 1977, p. 47). Public spats between prominent theists and atheists shed more heat than light on the debate, and often both parties are seen to be polarized in their own faiths. To seek the teaching of creationism alongside evolution, as is happening in some of our educational institutions under pressure from the religious right, is a nonsense. For the whole point of faith is that it comes from another domain of the human being and is not part of the scientific realm. To seek to put them together demeans both the value of science and all that it brings us and the value of God who is precious simply because he/she/it transcends the definable. Science is debased by attempts to equate the faux science of creationism with it, and scripture falls foul of scientific rationale, reduced to a fairytale instead of its rightful place as the poetic, mythic, inspiration towards the divine.

## Oh ye of little faith

Thomas Merton (1949) writes of a kind of faith that is not rooted in hopeful beliefs but in a deep sense of knowing – the kind of knowing that we feel when truth touches us

deeply (and certainly does not require nor is indeed accessible to scientific validation). Yet what of my own experience? Is this to be distrusted because I could be loading it with all kinds of psychological baggage, or the effects of drugs, or the fear of the moment? If the evidence of religious experience has any meaning in the world, then surely it is its transformative power – to make us more loving, more conscious, more socially engaged, more connected to the world, more healed and whole, more able to relate to others, more empowered to relieve the suffering of others, more able to see clearly the truth. The ‘more’ is the product of these extra-ordinary human experiences. Indeed to me for many years now these things have not been extraordinary but ordinary. Looking at how common they are amongst human beings, to not having them is extra-ordinary!

Paul Tillich (2000, p. 190) writes that ‘The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt’. As I lay on that trolley, alone and desolate, that vast black vortex was set to overwhelm me. In the depths of my being I cried out within, after the fear and the fury were dissipated, ‘Where are you now, where are you now when I need you most?’.

After what seemed like a long age but must have been no more than seconds, from the heart of the darkness came a still, calm, quiet voice – ‘I am here, I am here’. The nurse returned from behind the screens, the doctor arrived to do what he had to do. I opened my eyes to them and was at peace, ready to surrender myself into the hands of my carers and to the unknown. Perhaps those last words from the darkness were part of my nervous system seeking to reassure me, perhaps some conjured-up voice I needed to make it all OK, perhaps a sudden chemical or electrical discharge I had triggered to make it all feel better and give me courage. I did not experience it that way. That loving voice was real to me, a new dimension of God in the

dark as well as the light, something about God though perhaps not God himself, who is beyond words or identity.

Thomas Merton (1949, p. 79) writes that 'the God Who is God and not a philosopher's abstraction, lies infinitely beyond the reach of anything our eyes can see or minds can understand. No matter what perfection you predicate of Him, you have to add that He is not what we conceive by that term. He Who is infinite light is so tremendous in His evidence that our minds only see Him as darkness . . . to find God we must pass beyond everything that can be seen and enter into darkness.' A friend of mine said, 'I'm surprised you were afraid – I thought you were supposed to be spiritual'. I have often

heard this from fellow seekers, taking on board some delusion that the spiritual search somehow loses our humanity. It is human to fear; to be spiritual is to know that we are not our fear.

The toboggan of fear I rode on this occasion down the long dark slope took me to a place I had not expected nor would probably have gone to willingly. And oh those angels, those doctors and nurses who rode down with me, those companions in shadow, and those warriors against chaos – they stand with us on the existential edge, there with ropes and hooks to haul us back when it looks as if we might teeter over. And what hidden, unknown power works its way in them too, I wonder?

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*The community both forms and protects its members – forming them in communal sensitivity and protecting them from other people's insensitivity. In response to this individual formation and protection, the members form and protect the community. This mutual activity of forming and protecting is the means by which a community becomes a sanctuary. Community is not just a flying buttress supporting the sanctuary; at its best, it is itself part of the sanctuary*

*Abbot Christopher*

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