



Third Thoughts on Tightrope Walking

by *Martin Redfern*

THE THING that distinguishes witches from the rest of us, according to Terry Pratchett, writing in his fictitious Discworld novels, is not the ability to perform magic but to have third thoughts. We all have first thoughts — the immediate actions and reactions to everyday events. Sometimes we have second thoughts where we consider our actions and apply an internal observer to them. Third thoughts are less common. For those we need to observe the observer at some deeper level. And I'm sure that that is something we could all benefit from in our Network interactions.

The SMN aspires to be an organisation on the frontier, pushing the boundaries of science and of spirituality. In doing so we walk a tightrope, balancing between two great chasms. On one side lies the reductionist path to scientific materialism — powerful as far as it goes but ultimately a dead end — and on the other side is a steep and slippery slope that ends in new age mumbojumbo, wishful thinking and even religious dogmatism. Through our membership, the network is uniquely placed to balance between the two. Much thought is given at board meetings and in informal conversations about how to maintain that balance and it is to this aim that the Network guidelines have been drawn up and are occasionally refined.

The tools for adjusting balance are, in one direction intellectual rigour and the trusted methods of science and in the other, intuition and experience. Without rigour and we descend into world of fantasy. Without humility we cease to be guided by the rope and step off into oblivion. Without openness, sensitivity and compassion, we run the risk of pushing others off and falling ourselves in the resulting confusion.

Many of us walk a tightrope in our professional lives as well. Our colleagues, employers and grant-giving organisations are - or at least have to pretend to be - materialist reductionists and it would be professional suicide to challenge them directly. Even Nobel laureates get ridiculed if they come up with ideas that are too far beyond the accepted paradigm. However, many Network members are uniquely placed to push the frontiers of science from within. I would argue that the only effective way of doing that initially is through good science, so the bottom line of this commentary is a call to remember the S in the SMN.

I should come clean at this point. I am not a proper scientist! Although I

studied science and spend my life following its latest developments, it is as a journalist. I stand in awe at the intellects I am privileged to encounter in my work at the BBC and through the Network. Almost every day I get to hear of and sometimes report on new discoveries which make it quite clear that science is nowhere near the dead end of dogmatism as yet.

A few years ago BBC World Service News were keen to expand the amount of science they covered — potentially good news for my unit and, I like to think, the listeners. So we started giving them more stories. After a few weeks it became clear they weren't completely satisfied. At a series of meetings the truth emerged: they didn't want more stories on biochemistry and astrophysics, they wanted cures for cancer and missions to Mars! Of course there were no more cancer cures and Mars missions than there ever had been. We seem to have the same problem in finding good new research at the SMN..

Two years ago we staged a session at the British Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting at which Rupert Sheldrake presented some of his new research into telepathy. Predictably, it caused a stir and brought the materialists out of the woodwork in shocked horror that an august institution such as the BA should allow such nonsense! But, for those who bothered to read it, the data were impressive and the debate raised the profile of the subject and our organisation. I'd like to see the Network keeping up the pressure with further such presentations. But, perhaps surprisingly, there seems to be a shortage of rigorous new science in our field. There are plenty of scholarly reviews, philosophical interpretations and anecdotal observations but remarkably little quantifiable data that would stand the rigours of scientific analysis. I would love it if members would contact me with evidence that I am wrong.

At the recent annual gathering in Switzerland we discussed the dangers of dogmatism in science and religion. It was pointed out that religious dogma tends to be frozen in time but varies in space — from culture to culture. Whereas scientific dogma changes over time that is universal in space. We have all seen how a perfectly valid and interesting scientific discovery can change over time to become so dogmatic that it is accepted not only as being true within its original limitations but as a universal, complete and final

explanation. It becomes a belief and scientific fundamentalists can become as dogmatic as their religious opposite numbers.

Many of the things we discuss in the Network do not easily lend themselves to the physical measurements and repeatable observations of the scientific method. If we are to achieve wider credibility, we should still apply rigorous scientific methodology where we can. But the true frontier is perhaps in extending the scientific method to incorporate experience and intuition in a similarly rigorous framework. If we do not, another slippery slope awaits. It begins with measurement and observation, slides imperceptibly through experience and intuition and, before you know it, has run through interpretation into belief and ultimately dogma.

If the ability to believe or have faith is Darwinian (which it probably is not) then I lack the belief gene. But I like to think I make up for it by having a double dose of the hope gene. But it does mean that I tend to glaze over when people begin to expound wonderful interpretations of their worldview that are based on belief rather than evidence and direct experience. I think at very least we should all make an effort to identify clearly in articles and presentations wherever insights come from objective evidence, subjective experience or belief based interpretation. In that context I hasten to add that this is only my opinion!

In another session at the Annual Gathering we watched a film of neuroscientist Jill Bolte-Taylor describing her own experiences during a serious brain aneurysm. Now fully recovered, she portrayed graphically what it was like as the left hemisphere of her brain shut down, producing an almost mystical experience of universality but at the same time making it almost impossible to dial a phone number and making her attempts at speech when she got through sound like the howling of a demented Labrador!

She spoke with religious fervour of the experience of the right brain when it was not suppressed by the normally dominant left. But she did also describe it as a trip to "Lala Land". In the real world we need both hemispheres, both as individuals and in society. As a network we are uniquely placed at the junction between science and spirituality — the corpus callosum if you like — channelling information between the two sides and bringing them into harmony. Then we can enjoy the insights of 'third thoughts'.