



Sitting on Both Sides of the Fence (and above it too)

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In the Network Review Spring 2009 Martin Redfern wrote a provocative piece, 'Tight Ropes and Edges', discussing the balancing act that we in the Network constantly negotiate - balancing between the 'chasms' of science and spirituality.

On the one side, there is science that ensures the workings of our everyday world and 'reproducible by anyone anywhere', and, on the other side, there is spirituality that transcends our individual personal existence and concerned with the harmony of the whole. One can see the pitfalls and dangers on either side – science appears to be dissecting our natural world into smaller and smaller components so that the feeling of wholeness and soul is lost, whereas spirituality appears to encompass too much, from the vagaries of the new age growth movement to the intractable and outdated religious beliefs and conflicting 'stories' which no longer serve us in our modern existence. As an organisation, our SMN is almost unique in daring to embrace these seemingly opposite realms under the same umbrella and indeed friction can arise within the Network when the rigour and openness, which define our approach to inquiry, themselves seem to be in opposition. This friction between rigour and open-ness is also discussed by Martin, and by Chris Lyons in his following article in the Network Review Winter 2008 . Chris asks for more rigour, especially in the spiritual realm. Here I am concerned again with these questions. At the outset I will not call them problems. In fact, in this article, I will ask is there really a problem? Could tightropes and edges, and the creation of opposition between the realms of science and spirituality, of rigour and open-ness, be of our own making?

Let me say at the outset, I am a scientist - a hardcore molecular biologist, which might appear to be as reductionist as one can get - and I love science and the scientific endeavour. Of course the adjectives 'reductionist', and also 'materialist', usually applied to science (in a somewhat derogatory way to point out its limitations) are not always appropriate to my mind. Einstein (1950) defines science beautifully – 'The object of all science, whether natural science or psychology, is to co-ordinate our experiences and to bring them into a logical system'. Indeed, in my own work I have been involved just as much with bringing things together into higher and higher orders of magnitude as I have with taking them apart to the level of the single molecule. For example, in my research into the regulation of expression of a single specific gene, I have studied the ON/OFF regulation at increasing orders of complexity, viz., methylation of a single DNA cytosine base in the upstream vicinity of the gene, the probability of methylation of a range of cytosine bases upstream, the structure of the DNA helix in the region, the specific binding proteins involved, the higher order structure of the folding of the DNA into chromatin, the cellular compartment of the region of chromatin, the regulatory signals from inside the cell, the signals from the environment outside the cell, whole genome deprogramming and reprogramming, and the heritability of modifications

affecting gene expression potential through the germ line to the next generation. In other words from reductionist science to higher and higher orders of complexity. As to 'materialist'? The scientist must obviously take into account the space his material is in, and defines. Without 'material' there is no space and vice versa.

But whether we are 'at the bench', or working on how to perform a 'technological' task at home, we are all scientists in that we are blessed with a rational objective mind that can work things out logically and reproducibly. Thank goodness for 'reproducible by anyone anywhere' – we do not need custom-made light switches, washing machines, tools of everyday living, modes of transport, and so on. Science has liberated us in our civilised environments to spend time writing articles such as this. We all apply rational approaches to everyday activities.

I cannot say so easily that I am a spiritualist or a mystic because I cannot claim this in the same way as I can claim to have an occupation such as science. But I am aware of my mystic in the spiritual dimension. Defined simply, and perhaps naively, I know that I am a part of something much bigger, that is wonder-full in its wholeness, and that 'looks after me'. I would argue that we are all mystics too. It is a different place of being and knowing. For me (always looking for explanations), this sense of connectedness with the whole has an 'evolutionary' origin – knowing that existence has 'looked after' the long line of my ancestors from the primaeval ooze until me. My lineage has survived against almost impossible odds (and so has yours – work it out) and evolution has ensured that I am the right seed for this soil and vice versa. This knowing, that is more a transcendental knowing despite the rational evolutionary arguments, is the basis of my inner faith (hope and trust) and also is the source of gratitude, prayer and celebration, which I also consider to be inherent human qualities. As well as being a scientist and a mystic, I am also a poet. The Network does not spend so much time in the realm of the arts but we are all artists and poets as well (even if nobody appreciates our artistic endeavours). In this respect, the Network could well give more time to the arts in general. Perhaps we could have a member's poetry section in our Network Review.

Science, Poetry and Mysticism

So my first point is that the complete man is a three dimensional being - scientist, poet and mystic- he is not only the outer, not only the inner, but transcendental too. Three realms of knowing and being And, as I learnt from my spiritual master in the 70s, the man who only lives in one dimension lives a partial life and will never know the whole. A house divided against itself. And as within so without.

My second point is that I consider that these are three separate ways of knowing and being (although I know that not everyone agrees with me on this). As scientists, we are informed by our rational mind. The ability to project our experiences from the past into predictions for the future is a highly developed aspect of human consciousness. This ability enables us to manipulate and exploit situations - a highly successful survival strategy though one that currently threatens our planet and our co-inhabitants. (We can hope that our innate morality may curb the wrong use of this valuable asset and I agree with Chris that morality is 'fertile territory for the Network to explore'.) But the rational mind does not know all. In fact, it is limited by its very cleverness. It is so clever that it can use a mere skerrick of information as a clue and then fill in the rest with mental processing and integration with what has happened before and might be expected to happen next. Very rapidly our mind can provide a picture that may be largely divorced from reality! So thank goodness we have a heart-based way of knowing and being - the emotional intelligence of our poet who detects the ring of truth, often knows intuitively the right action to take, and is known to sometimes make the final decision despite the rational pros and cons calculated by the scientist mind. And then there is our mystic.

Whereas the scientist gains knowledge by taking things apart (and putting them together), the mystic gains knowledge by dissolving his boundaries and fusing with the whole, by awareness of universal laws governing harmony and function from the microcosm to the macrocosm. How often my mystic has informed my scientist! The scientist, the poet and the mystic represent the objective, the subjective and the transcendental self. The scientist seeks objective truth in his environment, the poet seeks subjective truth within, and the mystic explores the whole outside of his individual personal existence.

Complementary Perspectives

The third point I wish to make is that it is a mistake to attempt to integrate, or in any way try to blend or fuse into some synthesis, these different realms within ourselves. I don't know that we even need bridges. You just have to know where you are coming from at any given time. One has to be aware of what is appropriate. For instance, it is not appropriate to take wild speculation into the lab, nor to take cool rational logic into mystical or heart-felt experiences at the same time they are occurring (logic may be applied later). To ask how to 'reconcile' one's scientist and mystic and poet is a silly question. In fact, when I am in one realm of knowing and being I am not in the other two. It is not possible to 'come from' these different realms at the same time. Note how the heart poet can take over and finish with the mind scientist, how the scientist can demolish a spurious spirit mystic 'proof', how the spirit mystic can see the bigger picture and bring humility and perspective to the mind and the heart.

My fourth point concerns the conflict between the rigour and the open-ness rightly defended by the Network and addressed by Martin and Chris in their previous articles. Generally rigour is a word we apply only to science. Scientific rigour. Can we apply this rational rigour to the emotional and the spiritual realms? I would say, yes. If claims are made for new discoveries, for example, new forms of communication (e.g., telepathy), healing (e.g., homeopathy), past life regression, or life after death, and so on, then the evidence must be presented and subjected to the same rigour as would be applied to any other new discovery.

Any argument that some discoveries are beyond 'scientific' evaluation should be accompanied by elaboration of the type of rigorous evaluation that could be applied. In this respect, could we expand our definition of rigour? Is rigour only applicable to the objective or could we speak about emotional rigour and spiritual rigour as well. I am not clear on what these would be. Certainly we can speak of 'emotional intelligence' (which can be evaluated and which now seems to be a better indicator of future well-being than IQ). Perhaps universal truths common to the major religions could form a guide towards spiritual rigour.

My fifth and final point is to consider the origins and value of the polarisation between science and spirituality, and between science and art (the objective versus the subjective). When pitted against each other, arguments for and against may be taken to extremes. Such polarisation leads to far-flung and spurious claims on either side, and then dogmatism arises. We see such titles as Science versus Mysticism and Science versus Religion in everyday talks and media coverage. Religion is a tricky aspect of spirituality because different religions have different dogmas depending on who was chosen at the time to represent God in our image (or as some would say who God chose to represent himself in our image). We seem to need a human representative to talk to in prayer, to be comforted in times of stress, or to relate the teachings to our finite human existence. This aspect of conflict requires understanding and respect. But, leaving the different religions aside, my point here, and partly already made above, is that there is no place for conflict between the realms of the scientist, poet and mystic - they are not in the same ball parks! They cannot be pitted against each other. The polarisation is as meaningless as night versus day and dark versus light. I have been labelled an *extremiste du centre*. Maybe I am though not so much of the centre - not sitting on the fence but happily sitting on one side or the other. And above it as well. Though not in all three places at the same time. It is so necessary to be able to embrace the paradox, to be able to live harmoniously in the three realms within oneself, and for one's scientist, poet and mystic to talk to each other.

However all of the above is not to decry the value of polarised debate. We will continue to use it in good spirit, to use the opposition to sharpen our wits and to strengthen the arguments on our side (though hopefully not at the cost of false or unverifiable claims and making the opposition wrong in order to be more right). In any case, there is seldom a case of right and wrong - not black and white but shades of grey - and often our moral position (for the time being) is the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils. It is important to know where one stands on any issue (provided one is well enough informed) but to be open to change in the future.

I have outlined here five points concerning the nature of the balance required within ourselves, within the Network, and within our Network environment. In summary, there are three realms of knowing and being. They are each powerful and separate in nature. They cannot be integrated one with the other nor is there any need for them to be reconciled. They are to be lived in equally and with awareness. Finally, it may be possible to formulate new concepts of rigour and to remove the need to oppose one against the other. In this light do we still have tightropes and edges?

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