



# A New Renaissance - A Point of View

*Eleanor Stoneham*

*How are we to make any meaningful practical contribution to the healing of this world, assaulted as it is by societal and environmental problems that threaten our very survival? Eleanor Stoneham calls for wise tolerance, healing and the infusion of a compassionate and spiritual literacy throughout our lives, alongside a more holistic education for our children.*

The publication of *A New Renaissance: Transforming Science, Spirit and Society* marked an important milestone in the history of the Scientific and Medical Network. It challenges us 'to move boldly from theory to practice,' from open-ended discussion to appropriate, practical responses. The launch article, 'Crisis as Opportunity: Seizing the Moment for a New Renaissance-A Manifesto for Change,' (*Network Review* volume 100, 2009) included the call for an emerging spiritual ethos 'free from the straightjacket of outdated religious dogma' and several essays in *A New Renaissance* responded to that call. The launch conference for the book was reported on in the last edition of this Journal.

There is certainly strong consensus amongst contributing authors to *A New Renaissance* that alongside our scientific achievements we have lost sight of the sacred, the spiritual, and our purpose on the planet; that we are in a spiritual crisis as much as a political or ecological one, and that this needs urgently addressing.

Yet I believe that we must not dismiss religion so lightly.

## The Need for Wise Tolerance

It is true that the dogma and liturgy of religions may stifle some. It is true that for some the claims made by religions may seem absurd. But if religions were so ridiculous would they still be such a force to be reckoned with? Because as Max Payne (*A New Renaissance* chapter 16) reminds us, the rules and customs of ancestral religions still give meaning, purpose and spiritual nourishment to most of the seven billion people on the Earth today. 84% of the world's population have a faith or religion, often with deeply held convictions, and of the remaining 16% one half claim to be theistic even if not religious. And most Network members would agree that spiritual nourishment is necessary for human flourishing. Perhaps it is just unfortunate that the secular materialism of the West has the cultural initiative. Even in our own Network, religion sometimes comes in for disdain. This is not helpful. Amongst the stated aims of the Network, we are called to 'encourage a respect for Earth and Community which emphasises a holistic and spiritual approach,' but whilst we also stand for 'critical and open minded discussion of ideas that go beyond reductionist

science,' we are meant to be 'sensitive to a plurality of viewpoints.' We therefore aim above all else for tolerance and understanding, and this should extend across all faiths and religions, as well as between other beliefs and theories. The single object of the Network's founding constitution was after all 'the advancement of learning and religion.'

Let us not forget that the great faiths are uniquely positioned in the world, with enviable global networks that enable rapid response to crises, and facilitate the spread of ideas and teachings. They have undeniably been the source of much that we treasure in art and literature and so much more. And all in some form teach compassion, sharing the Golden Rule of 'do to others as you would have done to yourself.'

A moment's sensible reflection should also inform us all, including the militant atheists and humanists beyond our own Network, that calls for the abolition of religion are hopeless, and angst against religion really adds nothing positive towards the healing of the earth.

So let us not throw out the faith with the dogma.

The primary work of religions is the cure of souls and with that comes the potential of real healing, in body, mind and spirit. The essence of both religion and spirituality is also to bond with what is sacred (James d'Angelo, chapter 18). Satish Kumar (chapter 15) recognises the value of religious groups as long as they do not fall into the trap of maintaining their properties and their reputation rather than growing the spirituality of their followers. I agree strongly with that. Religious groups act as nurseries for seeking souls, he writes, and he calls for the restoration of spirit in religions, as well as in business and politics. 'The rivalry among religions would cease, if they realise that religious faiths are like rivers flowing into the same great ocean of spirituality.' That is a lovely thought.

The Shinto masters say that: 'my truth does not need to be the same as your truth.' And this is also the Jain way. We can all be right, in different ways. We can respect the other point of view totally, and find common factors, connecting strands, between otherwise conflicting arguments. This is Anekant, or non-violence of the mind, that requires us to recondition our minds; to change the way we look at ideas. Aidan Rankin explores this in his book, *Many Sided Wisdom*:

*A New Politics of the Spirit.* Incidentally Rankin also reminds us that we are attached to too many possessions, and he claims that it is this attachment, rather than religion per se, that is the cause of so many wars that are too often blamed exclusively on religion.

Max Payne has an idea of the transcendent that he believes is much bigger and more awesome than anything the religions can offer. His vision is of an emergent agnostic spirituality that 'sees beyond the conflicts of dogma and ritual,' and can resolve the conflicts of religions with a wise tolerance.

It is that 'wise tolerance' that we must nurture above all else and whatever our own particular faith or brand of spirituality, if we are to develop a more widespread and open spirituality in our world. Herein lies any hope of healing the current crises.

So what happens now?

### Turning Ideas into Action

I have been preoccupied for several years with how we raise the level of awareness for the healing needs of the world; how we raise the understanding and support for an intuitive, spiritual and compassionate way of life for us all, in everything that we do. This may very well require a healing of our own wounded behaviour first (of which more later) and may all seem a hopeless mission, when our representatives in both national and local government are criticised for allowing their faith or spirituality to influence their direction, and when vulnerability and humility are seen as weakness not strength. And how do we turn our ideas into action, when we remember that Networks such as our own do not reach the wider general public? As Paul Devereux reminds us (chapter 12), we operate within our own relatively small world. Max Payne believes that a small elite will lead the way towards healing the world. This elite will be those who think and are self aware of the society they live in, not necessarily those with the power or a long string of academic qualifications. It is true that A Programme of Action set out in the Manifesto offers support for action through publications, on line resources, outreach, conferences and other special events. That is good, but at every level we must all resist the temptation of yet more intellectualising without positive action.

There is a broad consensus in *A New Renaissance* that any action needs to start from the bottom up, from individuals and small groups. That involves us all, and now. This is where education becomes the vital thread that will bind all our various endeavours together within that wisdom of tolerance toward a common good. But it has to be a holistic spiritual education.

### Towards a Holistic Education

I visited Herm not very long ago, a very small Channel Island 'community' where life of necessity is simple. I watched the children playing outside, gloriously free and dirty and happy, playing with what nature has given to them, the trees and bushes and grass and flowers, and their own abilities to run and hide and shout and climb trees, to be themselves, and with not an adult in sight. And they had a sense of fun and joy and spirit that so rarely seems to survive into adulthood. And I recalled the vision held by human ecologist and campaigner Alastair McIntosh, described in his wonderfully inspirational book *Soil and Soul*, for a spiritually rich and holistic education. In this there would be a life-long curriculum of organic food and biodiversity, energy

alternatives and respect for all, healing skills incorporating not only the most important scientific advances but also the spiritual healing principles of poetry and story. There would be the study of conflict resolution and how to eliminate the causes of war. And the kids would have fun and play in tree houses. His wish list is long but the message is clear. Such an education is about: 'building of *community* as right relationship between soil, soul and society, powered by the passion of the heart, steered by the reason of the head, and then applied by the skilled technique of the hand.'

This was a view shared by Rudolf Steiner, who saw the danger of education being driven more by the economic needs of society than the interests of the child. He believed strongly in an education to develop the child's intellectual, creative and moral wellbeing, in an atmosphere of co-operation and love rather than competition. The fact that there are more than 900 Waldorf schools operating today worldwide, in 83 countries, and that the organisation continues to grow, is testament to the value placed by many on such holistic values.

Two contributors to *A New Renaissance* specifically tackle education as a practical response but appear to lack the spiritual element that I am looking for.

Guy Claxton (chapter 24) tells us that the real moral heart of an education is about character. He has a vision of schools that will teach these values, and hopes to provoke debate with his own 'Magnificent 8' list of character strengths and virtues he believes need to be taught to young people: curiosity, courage, exploration, experimentation, imagination, discipline, sociability and mindfulness. (Something along these lines is seen in the Learning for Life organisation, developing character education in the UK. The successful Values Poster Programme and now the Inspire/Aspire Olympic programme are successful projects for schools).

Then in Ian Cunningham's essay (chapter 25) I was fascinated, indeed perturbed, to learn that formal schooling apparently contributes at most 10-20% of what makes a 'good professional person' effective. The best learning is informal, outside the school day, from peers, family, reading, travel etc. And for many children this extracurricular activity is poor, to say the least. It is clearly important that we consider what is going on in our schools. As Ian reminds us, the quality of the education offered has a significant impact on how our children and youth will approach and address the global crises in their lives. Will they be able to see the overall picture or be shackled by knowledge fragmentation; will they act out of self-interest or learn to see the wider social dimension?

James d'Angelo (chapter 18) does call for a spiritual education from an early age, designed for the care of the soul, and incorporating meditation, prayer, contemplation of spiritual knowledge, participation in artistic activity and being of service to others. This should help to reveal the illusion of our material world and the reality of our internal nature. Society would then, he writes, reach a natural spiritual unity and religion would not need to be separated from daily life. And that is my dream also.

### Infusing our Lives with Spirit and Compassion

The education of our children towards spiritual literacy is clearly of fundamental importance, within a tolerant recognition that there is no one faith or spiritual practice that suits all. But there is the additional imperative that we practice our own belief or particular brand of spirituality, with

compassion, across all aspects of our lives, right now. I do not believe that we can morally separate our spiritual and intuitive lives from our involvement in the world; we have to live our principles in everything that we do, in public as well as in private. Spirituality and compassion should inform and infuse our economy, our medicine, our relationships, the environment, the media, our own creativity, our lives. And I do not think we are very good at this. Jean Hardy (chapter 20) understands this point when she calls for a rewriting of our political philosophy, with more self awareness, based on feeling as well as rationality, to give us a three dimensional politics recognising person, society and the sense of cosmos in one synthesised whole. Clement Jewitt (chapter 23) explores the transformative possibilities within Music and the Arts, and calls for them to be admitted into a more integrated way of living, 'for the good of our psychic balance, for the good of our souls.'

Others beyond our Network have written along similar lines.

For example, in *To Change the World* James Davison Hunter calls on Christians to pursue a 'Faithful Presence' throughout their lives, to take this on board from the local parish church outwards into the community, the workplace and into leisure activities, carrying the gospel message of faith and hope and love to those of any faith or none. This is not something that is reserved for Christians; Christ's love speaks to a basic human need in the whole community, and practiced well, such a paradigm should work towards a flourishing of the world all around us.

Ursula King, in *The Search for Spirituality: Our Global Quest for Meaning and Fulfilment*, explores spirituality in

religious traditions and in secular experience, and seeks meaning and wholeness in, for example, health, science, art, ecology and education. She calls for a wider spiritual awakening and more spiritual education at all levels, to gain a spiritual literacy that reaches a deep 'dimension of insight and wisdom that grows from the heart and fosters compassion and love.'

I am also attracted to Andrew Harvey's call for Sacred Activists in his book, *The Hope: A Guide to Sacred Activism*. Although some of his ideas for spiritual transformation quarrel with my own faith and belief systems, there is much that I can wholeheartedly agree with and indeed many of his proposals are already put into practice in churches up and down the land; the prayer, bible study and other church based groups I belong to are his 'Networks of Grace' by another name.

I have also explored this in much more detail in my book *Healing This Wounded Earth: with Compassion, Spirit and the Power of Hope*, within the additional context of our own healing needs, because we can wreak havoc if we avenge our unhealed spiritual and mental wounds on the world we all share.

## Conclusion

I pray for a future where we strive towards a more meaningful and spiritually based education for our children, where we seek to improve our own spiritual health and where we all infuse our whole lives with those spiritual and compassionate values. We may do these things in the name of God, Allah, The One, The Other, The Source, or any other name we choose to call upon for the transcendent. Yet if we foster the wisdom of tolerance, always with total respect for differing views, then this surely is the vital key to unlocking a more secure and better future for us all.

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