



Forty Years On

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In the last editorial our President, Peter Fenwick, urged us to remember “the enormous contribution to the Network of our founders and the incalculable debt owed by all of us who have come under their influence”. This exhortation is most timely as we enter 2013, since this marks the 40th anniversary of the SMN’s founding. This motivates my title, which has a particular personal resonance since it is also the title of my old school song!

The SMN was born at a meeting at Exeter University in 1973 convened by Patrick Shackleton, George Blaker, Peter Leggett and Sir Kelvin Spencer. They believed that neither orthodox religion nor conventional science answered the pressing questions of the day and that a new way of thinking was required. As a result of this meeting, it was agreed to invite a group of like-minded individuals to form a “network”, about 50 of whom accepted. One of these was Max Payne, who shared his recollections of the founders in an engrossing talk at the last Annual Gathering. An account by the founders themselves can be found in the first chapter of *Wider Horizons: Explorations in Science and Human Experiences*, written on the 25th anniversary of our founding. Max is one of the few surviving original members. Even such key figures as Peter Fenwick (who joined in 1977) and David Lorimer (who joined in 1983) are second generation and your chairman did not join until 1990.

Doubtless there will be much discussion in the coming year about how the SMN has changed in its first four decades and how it may continue to evolve in the future, so I would like to use this editorial to initiate this. The process will culminate when we return to Horsley Park next July for our Annual Gathering – the 25th residential one – to discuss “40 Years of Widening Horizons in Science, Medicine and Psychology”. This will feature a series of round-table discussions on the transformation in world-views in these areas since our founding. In the present discussion, I will focus mainly on changes within the SMN, although these must be seen against a background of global changes.

One change involves the size of the SMN. By the time David took over as Director in 1986, the membership had grown to around 400. It peaked at nearly 2000 – plus a further 800 associate members – at the turn of the millennium but then declined to the current size of around 1300. One reason for the decline is that the SMN has seeded other organizations with more specialised interests. For example, the British Holistic Medicine Association (BHMA) was founded by Patrick Pietroni in 1983, the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists was founded by Andrew Powell, Peter Fenwick and Julian Candy in 1999, the Transpersonal Psychology Section and Consciousness and Experiential Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society were founded by David Fontana, Max Velmans and Jane Henry in 1997. Thanks to the SMN, such topics have become more mainstream but this has also entailed a decrease in our own numbers.

Another change involves the age distribution of our members. There is no doubt that our constituency is primarily “middle-aged” and so there have been attempts to attract younger people in recent years. For example, the Blaker fund is explicitly targeted at students. However, misgivings about our age distribution may be misplaced. My impression is that young people are less likely to join organisations such as ours nowadays and we may just have to accept that our activities appeal to an older age group. In fact, this feature has positive aspects since the longevity and dynamism of our older members is one of our striking attributes. Mary Midgley, who has just become an honorary member, remains as sprightly as ever in her 90s and contributed an article in the last *Review*. A surprising number of members become centenarians: Sir Frederick Warner FRS reached 102, Mary Scott (the authority on Kundalini) reached 103 and Mary Swainson died on her 100th birthday. The concern should not be the average age of the membership *per se* but whether this average age is increasing and this is less clear. Without a constant influx of new members, the Network will certainly not exist in another 40 years, so there is no room for complacency.

More important perhaps than these demographic changes are the evolving expertise and interests of our members. Until recently we had rather little information about this but the recent online survey, the results of which were summarised by Olly Robinson in the last *Review*, has shed much light on this. Nearly a third of the membership replied and this has provided a wealth of information which will help us in planning our future strategies. Despite our name, medicine seems less emphasised now than in the early days, perhaps because this is catered for by other organisations. There are also fewer scientists and academics. Personally I regard this as a matter of concern but opinions differ about this and the balance between our scientific and spiritual activities has probably always vacillated. Perhaps the central interest nowadays is consciousness, despite the difficulties highlighted by Andrew Bell in the last issue of even defining what we mean by this, with a growing focus on neuroscience, meditation, NDEs etc. There also seems to be a burgeoning interest in creativity and the arts, as illustrated by the theme of next April’s Mystics and Scientists meeting: “The Nature of Inspiration in Art, Science and Spirituality”.

Another important change is that the SMN is no longer so unique. There are now many other organisations which cover some of our interests, which has both negative and positive aspects. On the one hand, it means that we face competition in expanding and maintaining our membership, so perhaps we need to identify our particular niche more precisely. On the other hand, it puts us into contact with many other like-minded people and allows us to become part of an even larger “meta-network”. This is why we frequently collaborate with sister organisations. For example, last October we hosted a joint meeting with the Society for Scientific Exploration (SSE) in Drogheda,

Ireland, on “Mapping Time, Mind and Space”. What was striking was the small overlap of members, despite the large overlap in interests, and we are trying to remedy this by exchanging publications and website access. The *Beyond the Brain* meeting next August will be in collaboration with the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS), which also happens to be celebrating its 40th anniversary.

Collaborating with the SSE and IONS might be regarded as enhancing our work on the scientific front. On the spiritual front, we will be participating in a meeting in London next June on the theme “Spirituality for a World in Crisis”. This has been initiated by the Wrekin Trust and Alister Hardy Society for the Study of Spiritual Experience but it also involves the International Association for Religious Freedom, the World Congress of Faiths, the Churches’ Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies, the British Teilhard Association, the Society for Psychical Research, and the Anthroposophical Movement. The hope is that an emerging alliance of spiritual and religious groupings can come together to produce a coherent vision and action plan for the future.

The final change to emphasize is our increasing involvement in educational activities, which is only appropriate since we are an educational charity. One might regard our entire programme of lectures and meetings as coming under this remit but an important recent development is the online MSc in “Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology”, which started last November. This is directed by Les Lancaster, Emeritus Professor of Transpersonal Psychology at Liverpool John Moores University, and operated in association with the Professional Development Foundation of Middlesex University. A distinctive and innovative feature of the programme is that students have access to the SMN’s archive of video and audio files from all our past meetings. We are fortunate that David Lorimer is overseeing this process as the SMN tutor, since nobody is better qualified to take on this role. The topic of the MSc is of course central to our remit, so it is gratifying that five of the first cohort of 21 students came from the SMN. Anyone interested in enrolling for the MSc next year can find further details from the course website www.transpersonalstudies.org.uk.

Although I have highlighted changes *within* the SMN over the last 40 years, no less influential have been the changes in the outside world. Peter’s last editorial reminded us that the world has changed hugely in recent decades, with the vast explosion in technology and instant global communication affecting every area of our lives. Like all organisations, the SMN has constantly adapted to these changing circumstances and the development of our website is an obvious example of this. In effect, the whole world has now become a network, testifying to the prescience of our founders in choosing our name. Even greater prescience is required to anticipate the changes that await us in the next 40 years!