



The Challenge of the New

Bernard Carr

LAST APRIL I was honoured to accept the invitation to succeed John Clarke as Chairman of the Network. Since this is my first editorial, I would like to start by reiterating my brief expression of thanks to John in the last issue for everything he has achieved over the last three years. He took on the role following the sad death of Bart van der Lugt but his vision and dedication guided us safely through that difficult period and he has overseen many important developments. At its last meeting the Board agreed to offer John a Vice-Presidency and I am delighted to report that he has accepted. This is not an honour which is automatically bestowed on ex-chairs but a way in which we can continue to take advantage of his wisdom and deep knowledge of the SMN, even though he is no longer on the Board.

Because I'm on sabbatical this year, I've mostly been abroad since becoming chairman. At first this caused me concern, since it's not so easy to follow in John's footsteps when I'm out of the country. However, being able to perceive the SMN from afar does at least help me to appreciate its special qualities – rather like looking back at the Earth from the moon – and to see its activities in a broader international perspective. Establishing closer links with organizations with allied interests both at home and abroad has become particularly important in the context of the New Renaissance project.

I've also found that being abroad doesn't make much practical difference to the running of the SMN. In this age of instant global communication, where every year seems to produce some new electronic wizardry, physical location is no longer so crucial. As stressed in the message from Gerri McManus, one of the most important recent developments in the SMN has been the expansion of our new website and the setting up of Facebook and LinkedIn groups. These activities transcend national boundaries and emphasize the essentially global nature of our enterprise.

Nevertheless, there is one supreme advantage in being back in the UK, and that is being able to attend the many stimulating and diverse SMN events which are organized by our Programme Committee. The purpose of these events is not only to exchange

information, a function which could be performed equally well in cyberspace. They are also social gatherings, in which interactions of the heart and spirit are just as important as those of the head. So whatever the benefits of the internet, and we clearly need to exploit these, it is no substitute for physical communion.

There could be no better illustration of this than the recent Annual Gathering, which it was my great privilege to attend and preside over in my first duty as chairman. Only at a physical meeting, for example, could one have witnessed the moving ceremony – masterminded by our President – in which the flame of chairmanship was literally passed on from John to myself. This year the Annual Gathering was held in Shirrell Heath and attracted the largest number of participants for a long time. The combination of the many new faces, the 'New Worldviews' theme, the spirit of the 'New Renaissance', and even the name of the venue – 'New Place' – all contributed to make this a particularly exciting event. Indeed, the prevalence of the new has inspired the title of this editorial.

The Annual Gathering, of course, provides a unique opportunity for the members to express their views, partly through their contributed talks on the Saturday, but also during the session on Sunday morning when they can question the Board and voice their concerns about the SMN and their aspirations for its future. I learnt a tremendous amount from this session.

One problem which came across concerns the wide range of enthusiasms of the members. We all have a general interest in science and spirituality but the emphasis varies considerably. One of my own passions, for example, is psychical research and – as illustrated by my other contribution in this issue – I'm particularly keen to extend physics to incorporate consciousness and associated mental, psychical and spiritual phenomena. However, I realize that this approach will not excite everyone, so I should stress that having two contributions in this issue is purely coincidental and that I do not intend to use my new position to regularly inflict long articles on the membership!

The polarity between science and spirituality has, of course, always been a central issue for the SMN. Maintaining the right balance is not

easy and the number of scientists has dwindled in recent years, which is a trend that needs to be reversed. But this raises problems of its own because the frontiers of science are constantly expanding and in these days of ever-increasing specialization, it becomes almost impossible to keep up with progress along the entire frontier. Marilyn Monk's regular contribution on recent developments in science and medicine is helping to resolve this problem but we need to focus more effort here.

While I have extolled the virtues of physical meetings, there is a price to be paid because a huge amount of time and resources go into organizing such events. Indeed, the need to provide services like this for our members is the main reason why the SMN has such a large annual deficit. This is made up by a generous subsidy each year from the Trustees but this means eating into our capital, which will only last a few decades at the present rate of attrition. Chris Lyons has been emphasizing this for a long time, but the seriousness of the situation only struck me when I became chairman.

Since all our income derives from subscriptions, conference fees or donations, there are only three solutions to this problem: an increase in our membership or the number of participants at our events; an increase in our subscriptions or the charges at our events; or an increase in our capital through fund-raising. As emphasized by Gerri, a key strategy in increasing our membership is to attract younger members and we are grateful for support in this aim by the Blaker fund. As regards our fund-raising efforts, these have been spearheaded by Olly Robinson and met with modest success. However, it's clear that we need more effort in this direction if we are to ensure our long-term survival, which is why there is an insert about this with the current issue. Last year we were fortunate to receive a substantial bequest and it is clear that legacies will also play an important role in furthering our work.

All of these issues in some way reflect the challenge of the new, be it the need to embrace new technology, the need to keep up with new ideas in science, or the need for new members. I look forward to further discussion of these issues in future editorials.