

Beyond the Brain II: Frontiers in Consciousness and Healing

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Two years ago at the first Beyond the Brain conference Willis Harman, then Director of the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS), set us on our way on the first evening with a penetrating summary of the assumptions and presuppositions which together make up the 'central myth' of orthodox science. He made a plea for science to expand towards a radical and participatory empiricism which honours intersubjective validity and gives all due weight to the power of the mind. Sadly his absence in death from this second Cambridge conference meant that we were touched not by the living quality of his thought, but by recollections of the quality of the man: TOM HURLEY of the IONS spoke movingly about his own inspiration by Willis's vision of the sacred mountain, and DAVID LORIMER recounted three dreams of Willis's which resonated through the days that followed.

What might Willis make of our conference this year? Did we in some small way begin to realize his hopes? On the first morning KENNETH RING demonstrated how orthodox and painstaking data collection linked with sensitive interpretation can lead to very unorthodox conclusions about the power of the mind: blind people, even those blind from birth, may 'see' during near death experiences. That afternoon, BARBARA BRENNAN expounded a coherent but for some controversial view of the way that mind influences the body through the Human Energy Field. In the HEF disease can be detected and indeed healed before it precipitates into the physical body. Barbara has a master's degree in physics, but some delegates felt that in the work she presented to us she has gone too far beyond the limits of what can be properly be termed scientific. In the orthodox sense, indeed she has. The issue is though: has she expanded it in a way which remains valid, which Willis for example would accept as a true enhancement of science. The tensions arising from different views about this as a more general issue ran as a taut thread through the conference.

She followed her exposition with a demonstration of the evocation of healing powers. During her dance, accompanied by overbreathing, one undoubted sceptic (a painter) was astonished to see her surrounded by a flame-like aura.

Next morning ERVIN LASZLO, in a characteristically lucid and wide-ranging talk, postulated that, like a fish in water, we are all immersed in an energy field of which we are unaware arising from the quantum vacuum but which not only provides the link between mind and body but also is where long-term memories are stored. Thus, as William James said, we are all like islands, separate at the surface but connected in the deep. He referred also to work done in Russia on torsion fields which though too technical for most of us, reminded me of our first encounter with these ideas and experiments during the Network trip to St Petersburg in 1995. Barbara Brennan, I heard, was very struck by parallels between this presentation and her own understanding of how consciousness exerts its powers over the body and the world.

Later that morning DR ANDREW POWELL spoke movingly of patients who are afflicted by entities from a realm beyond that bounded by birth and death. If he is to relieve his patient, the psychotherapist may need to engage with, and indeed heal, the sickness of such entities. This illustration of spiritual psychiatry in action well complemented PETER FENWICK'S earlier

exposition of the deficiencies of a science and a psychiatry which leave out mystical experience.

But here more needs to be said. It became clear from its reception and in conversation afterwards that for many people, including myself, Andrew's presentation was a high point of the conference. Why should this be? After all, the content itself, though deeply challenging to the orthodox, was far from exceptional for many in the audience. The answer I think relates to the way in which the style and manner (almost the aesthetics) of his presentation manifested a coming together, a fusion, of head and heart, of the objective and subjective. As Peter Fenwick remarked, Andrew is a master of his craft (orthodox medicine and psychiatry) who has transcended that craft in uniting it with the rigour of genuine empathy. True spirituality is an enhancement of consciousness in which feeling (not sentimentality) finds equal place with intellectual understanding. Maybe those who were not at the conference will be mystified by these comments, but perhaps that illustrates how lacking is our current language in the means to convey accurately flavours of feeling.

Language and its deficiencies provided the jumping off point from the *exploration* (not *explanation* as it stood inaptly in the printed programme) of 'what does not belong to the mind' conducted appropriately enough partly in silence by JEAN-MARC MANTEL. For some this experiential session was enlightening; for others empty or confusing. Again the tension between the experimental and the experiential awoke strong responses, particularly in delegates on one end or the other of this apparent divide.

On the last morning an aspect of this divide emerged in ROGER WOOLGER'S crowded presentation, which attempted to reflect a vision of a multi-dimensional psyche in a multi-dimensional universe. Do we regard matter as the ultimate reality, at the bottom of a triangle resting on its base; or do we see spirit as that reality, at the top of a triangle resting on its point? Central though to his vision was the notion, based on his experience as a regression therapist, that to know and to visit other dimensions, other worlds, can be a profoundly healing experience for us all.

Our last speaker was DAVID FONTANA, and was very well placed there. In the light of the tension amongst us concerning the role of science and its possible expansion, his remark that science at any age develops its own 'range of convenience' struck a unifying chord. The range adopted at any particular time does not, cannot, contain all of reality, but as culture and consciousness evolves, the range becomes wider, and perhaps differently placed. Consciousness though is primary; the triangle, to use Roger's image, is standing on its point, and within it consciousness flows down to create matter, as we strive from our material existence to climb back to spirit.

But the conference was not yet over. DAVID LORIMER, in a bold attempt to draw together significant themes, reminded us that objective and subjective (experimental and experiential) are themselves no more than 'psychological constructs'. This leads to the reflection that ultimately we cannot escape from the subjective, of which the objective is merely an apparent part. Perhaps the concept that they are separate is part of the 'central myth' of our science and culture of which Willis talked so eloquently two years ago. On this view the tension which animated the conference between these contrasted attitudes is something we need to outgrow.

And so to the final twenty minutes, when a moving event took place. A young man poured out a weight of pain and anger about exactly the theme I have highlighted - too much intellect, not enough heart. My perception (and it may not be his) is that the whole meeting, led by PETER FENWICK, held together against this onslaught, and thus was able individually and collectively to make a genuine response to his pain: both intellectually (though not by conceding where he seemed to some to be mistaken), and emotionally, by expressing acceptance and love. No other meeting I have ever attended could I think have avoided either trying to suppress his cry, or to ignore it by sidelining the discussion. I don't mean to belittle his suffering in saying that his deeply felt and shadow-laden plea provoked a consciousness-enhancing culmination to the conference.



Tom Hurley and Anne Baring at St John's. Photo: DL.

How much I know I have left out, and how much in my subjectivity may I have distorted what took place! KIM JOBST tackled the sensitive and significant problem of the presence or absence of the self, the soul, in dementia. TOM HURLEY laid before us his vision of how our cultural crisis in meaning might be resolved with the 'healing of the sacred body', which demands for the whole community a 'changed dream'. ANNE BARING combined words and pictures in a moving call for a rapprochement between the religious and scientific view of life that would honour the insights of alchemy and the cabbala. GILLIAN WRIGHT drew out the parallels between a holistic view of man and the global view of the world as a living system, emphasizing particularly the significance of the visual and the aural - 'picking up what's on the airwaves'. ANTHONY STEVENS gave us a perceptive and witty (though ultimately I felt reductionist) account of where the self, the shadow and the ego are placed in relation to the sacred.

But beyond that I haven't mentioned yet the less tangible elements which added savour to this exciting conference: the informal and sometimes spontaneous sessions with smaller groups of people; the poster presentations; the excellent food and accommodation; the impressively competent administration, both by the College and by the Network and IONS; and the quality of the delegates themselves, thus fostering conversations which ensured a friendly interchange of ideas and feelings.

Do I have recommendations for Beyond the Brain III? Three full-length presentations in a morning is tough on seat and mind, and somehow we need to achieve more audience participation. Perhaps in the last morning session we should divide into discussion groups, though the practicalities of this are formidable. A suitable penance should be devised for speakers who run seriously over time.

More significantly, what should be its particular focus, its subtitle? This time the topics and speakers gave an emphasis to healing, which in Willis's terms honours and acknowledges the

power of the mind. Sometimes we seemed to be on the brink of finding a way to develop that radical empiricism which would allow science to expand its 'range of convenience' to incorporate intersubjectivity, and thus consciousness, mind and spirit. This for me is the crucial theme. Perhaps our subtitle in two years' time should be 'The Science of Mind and Spirit'.

But for now I hope Willis is pleased with us.