



# The Science of Empathy and the Spirit of Compassion

University of Winchester 26-28 August 2011

## Elizabeth Archer

The weekend got off to a wet start, with many of us getting drenched in a torrential downpour just around the time of registration. But this did not dampen the enthusiasm of the 198 delegates who turned out for this year's Beyond the Brain conference – the 9th since 1995 - one of the biggest gatherings the SMN has ever seen.

The Friday evening started with a series of introductions from **Claudia Nielsen, Andrew Powell** and **Peter Fenwick**. Andrew spoke of how the Royal College of Psychiatrists special interest group on Spirituality and Psychiatry has grown out of the College's collaboration with the SMN on the Beyond the Brain series. Peter then presented a brief slide show about Echo, an elephant Matriarch in Kenya's Amboseli National Park. Echo was studied for over 40 years and her story offers us a powerful example of caring and empathic behaviour in large mammals. This set the scene for our discussion of empathy and compassion in the human arena.

**David Lorimer** continued the introduction with a short talk on 'empathic resonance', a term he coined in his book *Whole in One* (1990), and on the ethics of interconnectedness. He explored how human imagination is fundamental to the development of empathy and compassion, and quoted the novelist Ian McEwan: '*Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion and the beginning of morality.*' David listed a wide range of phenomena, such as psychometry, intuitive medical diagnosis, telesomatic experiences between twins, or the life review of near death

experiences, which demonstrate our intuitively shared experience. This suggests the existence of a universal consciousness that is accessible to each of us and which expresses itself through us. A natural metaphysical and moral order arises from this 'oneness of mind' and forms the basis of the Golden Rule – the understanding that we should not treat others as we would not wish to be treated ourselves. The evening concluded with tantalising introductions from all of the speakers scheduled for the next two days – **Iain McGilchrist, Karen Armstrong, Geshe Tashi Tsering, Paul Gilbert** and **Valeria Gazzola**.

Saturday morning dawned sunny and bright, and the conference day began with a pre-breakfast meditation led by Geshe Tashi Tsering. The main programme started with Karen Armstrong's powerful and passionate talk entitled *The Charter for Compassion: Wishing for a Better World*. In 2008 she was awarded the TED prize, which gave her the opportunity to realise her ambition to create a Charter for Compassion. A website was set up, inviting contributions from the public which were then considered by a council of activists from all religious backgrounds. Their conclusions were published as a call to action on [www.charterforcompassion.org](http://www.charterforcompassion.org) with an invitation to people all over the world to sign up. Karen described her frustration that the great religions of the world (which all place compassion at their core) are not working to build a global community in which we all can share. Instead, they are developing their own versions of the Golden Rule in which



Iain McGilchrist and Karen Armstrong

adherence to dogma becomes the test of faith. She stated that it is only through compassion that we can learn to co-exist peacefully, but our understanding of this has not developed in tandem with the emergence of economic and cultural globalisation. Compassion is not just 'feeling with' others, and is definitely not about pity. What is being called for now is a principled determination to act in the world in a compassionate way. Compassion is a form of love that she likens to mother love, which is exacting and tough. We must commit ourselves to ending the suffering of all living creature in the world, and if we fail to take care of others it will inevitably rebound on us.

Karen explained that the meaning of the word 'belief' has changed since Chaucer's time, when it meant commitment rather than simply the acceptance of dogma. Daily, committed practice is essential if we are to develop our capacities of mind and heart, and our compassion will only grow through putting it into action. In her book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Karen deliberately refers to the Alcoholics Anonymous 12 step treatment programme because she sees our 'pet hates' as a form of addiction. These pet hates enable us to 'box up and throw away' individuals and spiritual communities in order to satisfy our own needs. Instead, we must learn a new way to speak to each other – one that is not adversarial but which arises out of a willingness to change and an openness to the other's suffering – however inchoate. Karen deplored the media's tendency to focus on negatives and stereotypes and urged us to speak out when we see things misreported or injustice taking place. The media has enormous power to influence the public's attitudes and behaviours. But she cautioned us to follow Gandhi's example when we are about to speak, and to ask ourselves if our intention is to hurt or to heal. She quoted St Paul, who wrote that charity (compassion) is patient and kind, and that it is not 'puffed up' and takes no delight in the wrongdoing of others.

She spoke of the extraordinary response in Pakistan to the Charter for Compassion. There, practical action has included the introduction of teaching modules on compassion in schools and universities. A version of Sesame Street has been created in which a new character exhibits compassionate thinking and behaviour. The show remains as lively and humorous as ever, and is being taken out to children living in rural areas. In contrast, the response the Charter in the UK has been negligible. Our aim should be to cultivate the ability to "love your enemies", where love is not an emotion so much as *loyalty*, in which we genuinely seek to safeguard each other's interests.

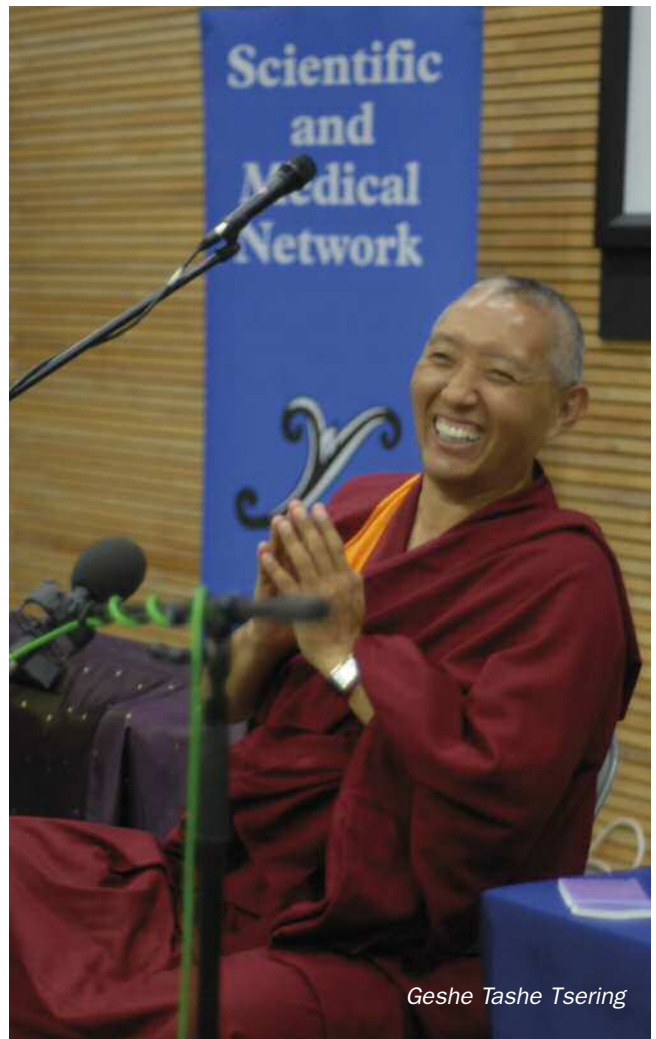
Karen then considered the power of drama and tragedy as a way to cultivate compassion, since the shared experience and expression of strong emotion binds us together in our shared humanity. In ancient Athens it was a civic duty to attend dramatic performances which deliberately set out to reinterpret ancient myths in a form that addressed the issues of the moment. The people were moved to weep for tragic figures such as Oedipus, who unwittingly broke our most powerful taboos. We are at our most god-like when we can see that our enemies suffer pain as we do, and suffer with them. Karen pointed out that we also have to learn compassion for ourselves before we can learn to show compassion for others, and this must involve looking at our shadow side. We must learn to know and accept ourselves fully, but this is a process that calls for time and a willingness to nurture ourselves. Knowing our own suffering enables us to touch those who also suffer. We are in a state of grace only when we are *striving* for something, not when that thing has been achieved.

Iain McGilchrist followed on with another fascinating and powerful lecture entitled "*Erasmus or Machiavelli: Empathy and the Brain*", in which he used these two historical figures as exemplars of our different ways of understanding reality. In *Il Principe* Machiavelli set out one kind of wisdom, which is that rulers should play their cards close to their chest and

make sure that they are not too much liked. Here, individualistic and self-interested behaviour are seen as beneficial. The counterpoint is Erasmus, a man who celebrated the wonder of life and was famously empathic and tolerant. In his work *Institutio Principis Christiani*, he argued that a prince should be loved by his subjects, and should think more about the group than the individual. For Erasmus, true happiness comes from accepting what we are.

We seek to understand the nature of truth, but at the heart of truth there is always paradox. The brain is divided into two distinct halves, the right and left hemispheres, which are connected anatomically by the corpus callosum. The paradox at the heart of truth arises because the two hemispheres interpret reality differently. Studies on the brain seem to focus mostly on the left hemisphere (which gives us language and rationality) and largely ignore the right hemisphere (which enables us to interpret information and find holistic meaning). Iain cited John Cutting's book, *The Right Cerebral Hemisphere and Psychiatric Disorders*, as a classic study of what happens when things go wrong in the right hemisphere, and demonstrates the devastating effects of loss of right hemisphere function.

Our experience is modulated by the brain and its structures, and the main function of the frontal lobes is to inhibit the immediacy of our emotional responses. Only when we do this can we 'put ourselves in another's shoes' or work out the likely consequences of a given action. In other words the frontal lobes, which make up 35% of the human brain, are predominantly *inhibitory* in their function. Iain's own book, *The Master and his Emissary*, explores the function of the right hemisphere. He explained that we need *both* halves of the brain fully to understand reality, and it is not about



Geshe Tashe Tsering



making choices between them. The left hemisphere maps the world in such a way that we become abstracted from it, while the right hemisphere shows us connections and put us in touch with embodied experience. It is all about *process*. Furthermore, we must have boundaries in place if we are to function properly, including separation between individuals, and the absolute boundary between life and death. Without boundaries all we have is fusion with unity. He went on to propose that the intrinsic asymmetry of the brain arose because it brought evolutionary advantages. We appear to need two different kinds of attention: firstly, detailed, focused attention in which information is broken down into manageable pieces by the left hemisphere; and secondly, the broad, unfocused and inclusive attention of the right hemisphere. Unfortunately, we cannot use these two kinds of consciousness simultaneously, and whichever model of 'truth' is developed by the dominant consciousness will tend to close us down to other possibilities. Fully grasping reality requires us to use both forms of attention. The left hemisphere knows some things but the right hemisphere knows more. Unfortunately, the left hemisphere does not know what it does not know!

The right frontal lobe is the seat of those things that really make us human, namely human relationship and empathy. Our embodied existence includes the tension that arises out of our division from unity, and Iain suggests that this is the source of our suffering. It is tremendously important for us to recognise the dark (shadow) side, but we must always view it in the context of the whole. Also, we are not just the product of our genes but have choices, in other words, free will. The natural human condition is one of empathy (which he believes is beaten out of, rather than into, our children by our education system). Like the large mammals, children have a natural sense of compassion and spiritual awareness - it takes more effort to lie and deceive than to be honest and genuine.

Iain also quoted Neil MacGregor, from *A History of the World in 100 Objects* : "one of the greatest discoveries for me is that as soon as we started making things, we started making beautiful things." He spoke of how drama and theatre provide the necessary distance between ourselves and others to enable us to see others' pain and find compassion for it. This is what the right hemisphere does for us. We cannot have empathy without the separation that produces suffering, and when we are empathic we tend to imitate. This goes beyond simply the activity of the mirror neurons in the brain, so it is important that we are careful what we *think*. Iain pointed out that 'inhibition is the source of creation' since it is the major role of the frontal lobes. Thus, it is more important for us to define what we must not do than it is to set out what we should do. We must aim to stop the actions or choices we do not want and then trust that compassion will fill the space.

Iain ended by saying that unity and division are both needed, but unity must trump division. In the process of learning, information goes from the right brain to the left brain, and then *back* to the right brain again. Without the final stage of this process we cannot make sense of our choices or actions in the wider context. The practice of mindfulness is a very good way of accessing what the right hemisphere knows.

The subsequent discussion between Iain and Karen was wide ranging. Iain commented that the history of ancient Greece and Rome did not give grounds for optimism for our own society, since both cultures started well but degenerated as they moved more and more into the left brain. Both Karen and Iain noted that, interestingly, most of their incoming e-mails were from business people. Karen interpreted this to mean that there is growing awareness in the corporate world of the need for compassion, but Iain expressed anxieties that this may be because they were hoping to use knowledge of the right brain in order to become more effective leaders (or manipulators)! Karen commented that, after leaving this



Iain McGilchrist

conference, we must all find some way to move into compassionate action and that business people are very good at doing this. Both Karen and Iain agreed that when speaking before an audience they may become inarticulate when trying to express complex or deeply emotional concepts, but that they came alive when in front of a live audience because they gained energy from the audience responses. We must strive to keep alive the absolute sanctity of human life, however useless or expendable it may appear. We need our limits and boundaries to guide us, and we must remain mindful that it is all about intention and not outcome. Iain finished by commenting that 'anyone who says they are definitely right is definitely wrong'!

On the Saturday afternoon I chose to attend a practical workshop with Geshe Tashi Tsering, who started the session with a discussion of meditation. He explained that the Tibetan word for meditation is "gom", which literally means "get used to it". In other words, we must familiarise ourselves with our state of mind. Meditation is a mental exercise to enable us to connect with our thoughts and feelings, and mindfulness meditation seems particularly suitable for the Western mind because our minds are so active. He took us through the meditation process, and talked about how we can use meditation to enhance and develop compassion – a subject he explored in more detail during his main talk in the evening, on the spirit of compassion in Tibetan Buddhism.

Geshe Tashi Tsering's main talk was introduced by Peter Fenwick, who referred to studies that have shown that the frontal cortex of meditators grows larger in the area that deals with the mediation of fear, and the extent of growth increases with the duration of their meditation practice. There is also evidence that connectedness within the brain increases amongst meditators. Geshe Tashi Tsering went on to speak with wonderful clarity and directness about compassion, starting by pointing out that compassion is important to us at the beginning, the middle, and the end of our lives. Our spiritual life is initiated through compassion at the start, then compassion nurtures our spiritual life in the middle, and at the end of life we come to experience others' compassion.

Compassion is not easy to define, but all of us have the capacity to feel empathy for other living creatures who are suffering or in difficulty. That empathy is the seed that will turn into a fully awakened compassionate mind if it is properly nurtured. Different spiritual traditions have different methods for bringing that seed to fruition, and he explained that he spoke from the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism. The historical Buddha's first teaching was on the four Noble truths, of which the first two are suffering (*dukkha*) and the origin of suffering. Our own *dukkha* must be fully understood

before compassion can be cultivated, and the understanding must be more than simply intellectual. Once *dukkha* has been understood, its origins must be abandoned. So, our first task is fully to understand the first two Noble Truths in relation to ourselves, since only then can we begin to understand the suffering of others.

The cultivation of compassion in Mahayana tradition is very clearly structured. Once we have fully understood our own *dukkha*, and its origins, we can undertake the next step, which is to *equalise* ourselves with others. This is described by Shanti Deva in *The Way of the Bodhisattva* (chapter 8). We must recognise that our yearnings are no different from anyone else's, and no one person has more right than any other to gain relief from their suffering. Through this process we can achieve *equanimity*. We then meditate on equanimity, bringing it into contemplation time and time again, until wisdom emerges at the *heart* level. Once compassion is generated and experienced at the heart level it becomes natural and spontaneous. The second step is to aim to exchange oneself for others at a mental level, in other words, to shift ideas and actions from "I" (ego mind) to "other" (the other person), and to wish for the relief of their suffering. Only when this transformation has been achieved do we become truly altruistic. The third stage involves taking on *responsibility* for ensuring the relief of others' suffering.

In Buddhism, compassion and love are not the same thing. Compassion is the genuine wish that another becomes free from *dukkha*, which involves taking away from that person something that has already been given. Love, on the other hand, is genuinely wanting the other to experience happiness, which is giving them something that they lack. Furthermore, there are different forms of compassion: *normal compassion* is the ordinary compassion that we can all feel; *immeasurable compassion* is the focus on vast numbers of creatures, and *great compassion* is taking responsibility for freeing all other creatures from *dukkha*. In Buddhism, compassion in action has two important elements - the initial *intention* as well as the final *outcome*. Whether or not we follow any spiritual path, it is crucial to be able to exercise compassion individually, in the family and in

society. It is something that cannot be bought, or produced by anyone else, and the creation of the compassionate mind requires us to put in effort.

On the Saturday evening we enjoyed some entertainment in which **Jenna Munroe**, accompanied by **James D'Angelo**, sang a variety of songs on the theme of compassion. This aptly rounded off an absolutely fascinating day, which was rich in insights and ideas.

Sunday morning started with a second pre-breakfast meditation, this time led by **Sue Bailey**, who introduced us to 'heartmath' techniques. The first lecture of the day marked a change in direction for our exploration of compassion, away from the spiritual and philosophical and on into brain function and its relationship with our emotions and behaviours in ordinary life.

Paul Gilbert started with a densely packed and highly informative presentation entitled 'The Benefits and Fears of Compassion: future directions in compassion research'. He set out to address how we can attempt to build compassion as a means of relieving the suffering of individuals in a therapeutic context, and he started by examining the evolution of modern brain and mind. He outlined how the human brain has evolved from the 'old' reptilian brain (dealing with basic emotions and survival, often summarised as the four Fs – feeding, fighting, fleeing, and 'reproduction') through the mammalian brain (caring, development of group alliances, status) to the modern brain. This 'new' brain allows us to fantasise, to look forwards and backwards in time, and to reflect about ourselves. But the new brain is still linked with the old brain and our 'old' behaviours may become entangled with the choices we make. Compassion begins in the old brain (intention) but it is expressed via the new brain (outcome). In addition, our expectations of the world are very much determined by our early life experience. For example, the children of depressed mothers, who do not interact normally with their children, develop a range of problems not found in children who have grown up with an experience of positive interaction and care. Our neurological systems develop in response to experience, and without positive experiences we tend to focus on the negatives.



Valeria Gazzola, Peter Fenwick and Paul Gilbert

Furthermore, major physiological systems associated with affiliation and relationship may become impaired, for example the release of the hormone oxytocin which is linked with bonding and trust. He discussed how our innate tendency for compassion can be accentuated by developing attributes such as sensitivity, sympathy, distress tolerance, empathy, non-judgement, and care for our own well-being. The development of skills in all these areas can be enhanced therapeutically through the use of imagery, reasoning, behaviour changes, sensory inputs, mindfulness and feelings. A tendency to negativity and lack of trust can be overcome by focusing attention on the positives rather than negatives, and growing the capacity to tolerate the distress that comes up as we become aware of our own suffering. Those whose lives are dominated by 'old' brain emotions may have great difficulty modifying their instinctual and reflex responses, but with training it is possible. This forms the basis of compassion focused therapy.

Paul explained that simply focusing on suffering in the world will result in emotional burnout, so it is essential that we develop the skills to tolerate suffering and respond to it in a positive way. We can choose to develop the skills to support our compassion mind, rather than the threat mind, and bringing forward an internal voice of warmth and self-care is an essential part of this process. But developing compassion also requires courage, since we have to be prepared to take charge of our lives and to go into our pain in order to transform it. Meditation practice produces change in the frontal cortex and immune system, and it is clear that our thoughts are capable of producing physiological change. Developing the compassion mind has a calming effect on our threat mind and enables us better to manage reactive feelings, thoughts and behaviours.

Valeria Gazzola followed on with a beautifully presented talk entitled 'Mirror Neurons: the role of the motor and somato-sensory system in social perception'. Neurons in the brain discharge when we act, but they also discharge when we observe someone else performing the same action. Using local magnetic sources we can excite or inhibit activity in parts of the cerebral cortex, and when the somato-sensory cortex is inhibited our action perception becomes less effective. The areas of brain which are activated are specific to the action, though 'cross modality' can be demonstrated on MRI scanning, linking, for example, sight, sound and the action itself. When we hear a sound, we automatically map in our own brain how we imagine that sound has been produced, and if witnessing something unfamiliar we utilise the closest experience that we have in order to do so. The system is moderated by learning, and when people self-rate high for empathy their mirror neuron system turns out to be more active on testing, reflecting individual variation. Variations occur between the sexes, and between in-groups and out-groups - relating to factors such as race or skin colour (but independent of degrees of racism in the observer).

Psychopathy also affects mirror neuron responses, with reduced spontaneous somato-sensory, motor and emotional sharing. Interestingly, these individuals are able to produce mirror responses when asked to do so, indicating that the capacity is still there - if they choose to use it. When we observe other people it appears that we map in our own brains the sensations, emotions and actions that we have witnessed, and then project these maps onto the other. This is spontaneous empathy, which is pre-reflective and perhaps is where we start to recognise the Golden Rule. Subsequent reflection modulates these responses according to personal experience, attention, and so on, which in turn affects our perception and decision-making. This is post reflective or deliberate empathy, and again the Golden Rule can operate here in terms of the choices for action that we take.

In response to questions, Valeria spoke of the possibility that excess exposure to violence in films might desensitise us, but that this has yet to be investigated. However, it is

known that mirror neurons respond to actions and emotions depicted in films. She also touched on how it would be valuable to investigate the use of spontaneous empathy training as a means of treating psychopathic personality.

The subsequent discussion between Valeria and Paul was lively and broad in its scope. Paul spoke of his fascination with the differentiation between spontaneous and deliberate empathy, pointing out that psychopaths have a motivational problem which is that 'they don't care about caring'. People with Asperger's syndrome, on the other hand, have the motivation to care but seem to lack capacity to understand how other people's minds work. It is characteristics of all human beings that we can switch off empathy in certain social situations, and one factor that leads us to override our caring is the degree to which we show obedience to authority. These observations highlight how important it is for us to develop insight into our behaviours. Paul also pointed out that the group is very important in helping us to make sense of reality for ourselves, and a therapeutic group is essential for people working with compassion focused therapy. Paul observed that he is constantly amazed by the compassion that participating patients can exhibit when given permission within the group, especially among those with psychosis.

After lunch we were shown a short film entitled "The Wolf Within" about restorative justice as a form of practical compassion in the justice system. The film was introduced by **Janine Edge**, and is available online at [therestorativejusticeprogramme.org.uk](http://therestorativejusticeprogramme.org.uk)

We then broke into groups for the final session on Sunday afternoon, and I chose to join Iain McGilchrist's discussion group. This was an opportunity for Iain to expand on the ideas he presented during his talk, which is that we need both the holistic (right hemisphere) and differentiated (left hemisphere) viewpoints. People develop natural perceptual biases, in other words they have preferences to use the right more than the left brain, or vice versa. Everything is served by both hemispheres but with a different slant in each - the right hemisphere gives depth to our understanding, while the left hemisphere tends to "flatten out" our intellectual landscape. However, the cards are always stacked in favour of the left hemisphere because it gathers power to itself and simply does not see what is *not* itself. So, when the right hemisphere starts to investigate reality, it finds that the left has already created an *artefactual* reality that has effectively pre-empted the right hemisphere's input. He commented that people who have had their corpus callosum divided cannot be creative in the same way as the rest of us, nor dream in the same way - and apparently they can't rhyme either! It seems that 1% of the population is born with agenesis of the corpus callosum. The brain sculpts itself by closing down connections, which means that it is *undoing* that is the creative process - like a sculptor chiselling away stone to reveal the sculpture within. This is why we should be articulating and focusing on the things we should stop doing, rather than deciding what we should try to do. It is only when we stop doing the wrong things that we make space for the right things to emerge.

Iain went on to describe how new movements in human history grow from their predecessors. For example, the romantic movement was about cognitive changes and not simply an inversion of the Enlightenment. It was about imagination, not just emotion. The common way of dealing with the mind-body dichotomy is to deny one or the other, but they are separate phenomena and not mutually exclusive. Each represents a different perception. When asked about non-duality, Iain responded that it is perfectly possible to rest in a non-dual state. Differentiation arises out of the non-dual state, but this does not mean that there are now two states, since all is still one! The brain only exists in synaptic connection, in other words it only exists in the relations *between* things. Everything is co-arising, as illustrated by Escher's famous drawing of two hands sketching each other, but it is a mistake to believe that there is a starting point, or





to go looking for one. Iain commented that he feels that the one thing amongst his patients that caused the most suffering it is the belief that they have to be perfect.

The day ended with a panel discussion in which a number of important issues were identified and discussed:

- The problem of compassion fatigue resulting from feelings of overwhelm and hopelessness. The way to counter this is to focus on the positive. Many people these days prefer to give money rather than to get personally involved, often because they are too busy or do not feel they have an accessible community to engage with. However, participation is the way we grow our compassion and empathy.
- Contemporary society is much more open, flexible and tolerant than it was in, say, the 1950s. Paul Hawken's work (*Blessed Unrest*) demonstrates that the non-governmental and charity sectors are flourishing around the planet, and personal action is easier than we think.
- The impending world crisis presents us with a huge challenge with respect to individual and collective compassion, as we confront a massive cull of the human population by one means or another. But, we are responsible for our own choices, and the compassionate response is to challenge vested interests and tackle crucial issues such as over-consumption and human population growth.
- The Yin-Yang symbol illustrates how that which appears to be dualism is, in reality, complementary opposites within unity. The two halves of the symbol are in perfect balance with each other, and each one contains a small element of the other.
- Images that members of the panel and the audience felt they would like take away from the conference included the Yin-Yang symbol; the idea of planting and

nurturing the seed of compassion; and the elephant matriarch, Echo, caring for her struggling calf.

Finally, Peter thanked the speakers, and David summed up. He drew the conference to a close with a couple of quotes, including this from Albert Schweitzer: '*Our task is now to expand our circle of compassion to include the whole of humanity.*'

This conference was one of the best SMN events I have attended, and I left feeling challenged, informed, intrigued and nurtured, in equal measure! The high points for me were the passionate and learned talks from both Karen Armstrong and Iain McGilchrist (with the added bonus of extra time in discussion with Iain on Sunday afternoon). I was deeply affected by the time spent with Geshe Tashi Tsering, whose presence and wisdom were as nurturing as they were impressive. Like all great teachers, he was able to convey in simple terms ideas that are both deep and complex, and I was left feeling that I understood a great deal more than I have been able to re-capture in this review. Paul Gilbert and Valeria Gazzola complemented Saturday's more right hemisphere discussions with a hefty dose of left hemisphere material on the Sunday! They both managed to put across a great deal of detailed information about neurophysiology and psychology, and then wove it skillfully into the conference's ongoing discussion of empathy and compassion. The overall result was a well balanced and effective exploration of what is – for me, at least – the pressing moral choice of our time. I believe that our capacity to respond effectively to the gathering global 'perfect storm' is dependent on our making a choice to 'grow' empathy and cultivate practical compassion as the way to life from now on.

*Dr. Elizabeth Archer is a retired GP with an interest in spirituality and health.*



# Report on the Annual Gathering, 2011

*Diana Williams*

The 23rd annual gathering was held at New Place, Shirrel Heath in Hampshire, - old house, good facilities, lawns, woods, herbaceous borders, gravel elegantly combed in concentric circles, and glimpses of diminutive bridesmaids skipping in flowery excitement to their bride's 'big day.' Hors d'oeuvres arrived arranged on square slate platters in a private dining room, resounding with the high volume enthusiasm of fifty-two Network members deeply into connection, till we were summoned to the opening session on our theme: 'Creativity and Ways of Knowing, in Science, Art and Spirituality.'

Quietly focused with the lighting of the candle, we settled to watch a filmed interview with Sir Paul Nurse, PRS, called 'Science under Threat', made for the BBC Horizon series. Sir Paul expresses deep concern that the gap between irrefutable scientific evidence and public acceptance of it, has grown alarmingly, most particularly in relation to the human contribution to climate change. A combination of pressure groups, the media, and a widespread fear and reluctance to accept change, results in an alarming degree of denial and repudiation of the facts, falsely attributing unwelcome information to political motivation. The emphatic message to scientists is the urgent need to find ways to communicate better, and more convincingly.

**Chris Clarke** in his talk on Saturday morning, called 'Knowing, Being and Doing: connecting science and spirituality in a living planet,' picked up the theme of this denial and what might be happening in it. Chris thinks the message 'there has to be change', is *heard*, as 'you will have to change,' and *felt*, as 'who you are' will have to change.'

That *feels* intolerable and threatening, and results in defensive denial: 'perhaps the scientists have got it wrong.'

Chris went on to explore the conflict in the light of differences between ways of knowing, which he proposes can best be understood through dual system models of the mind, in particular those proposed by Teasdale and Barnard, Iain McGilchrist, Marsha Lineham, and others. The differences are between two modes of functioning, variously described as the propositional - analytic, language based, rational, abstract, left brain, and concerned with causality, and the implicational mode: sense based, holistic, intuitive, right brain, and with a focus on relationship. The question facing us is how these different ways of knowing what the world is like, can be better integrated in relation to each other, and be equally valued.

Chris sees indications of the way forward both in science and spirituality. From science, he sees the basis for solution in quantum cosmology, in which the key feature in a generalised sense is the nature of observation and the way it shapes what is observed. He tells us that we now have a clear view of that from quantum mechanics, but not why the universe evolved out of the range of possibilities, exactly as it did. In terms of spirituality, he finds Marsha Lineham's concept helpful, of 'rational and emotional mind' in relation to the duality, with a third aspect she calls 'wise mind', mediating between rationality and emotion. What is this wisdom, Chris Clarke asks? It has a mediating transcendent function which correlates with much that has been said by spiritual teachers in many traditions, and has resonance for Chris, with the wisdom of God. Humanity needs a *project* in which we can work to bring both aspects into new



Chris Clarke

relationship. Climate change and our relationship with the earth involves both, and offers a supreme opportunity to heal the disjunction between them.

Comments from the floor after the talk were in agreement about the need for both aspects, and emphasised the absolute necessity for wisdom, wherever it may be found. One commentator stressed the importance of believing in 'the right god', since as another reminded us, there are 'some mucky political motivations about.' There is hope, but it depends on action, if catastrophe has any possibility of being averted. The views Chris expressed here, are expanded in his recent book 'Weaving the Cosmos'.

On Saturday evening, we had another opportunity for exploring this theme, with the first ever showing of a new film called 'Animate Earth' made at Schumacher College by **Sally Angel** and Josh Good, with commentary by Dr Stephan Harding, and featuring Brian Goodwin, Fritjof Capra, Iain McGilchrist and Jules Cashford. James Lovelock's Gaia theory is beautifully presented and illustrated, and the absolute necessity for developing a holistic science equally informed by both the rational and the intuitive mind if we and the earth are to survive, is convincingly demonstrated.

In the second talk on Saturday morning, **Andrew Robinson** explored the theme of genius in relation to creativity, with reference to his book 'Genius, Sudden Genius, and Creative Breakthroughs.' Genius is hard to define: is it that which has changed the world, takes time to be recognised? Is talent and genius a continuum, or do the two never meet? Is there a hierarchy of genius? Who is doing the judging? Are Eureka moments part of creativity and genius, or is it a gradual path, - more a case of 1% inspiration, and 99% perspiration, as Edison remarked?

Robinson is particularly interested in the phenomenon of 'sudden breakthrough', and is in agreement with American John Hay who observed there seems to be a period of ten years from the time of beginning to work in a field, and the time which could, perhaps with hindsight, be recognised as

the 'peak' or 'breakthrough' point of ultimate achievement. Andrew gave a number of examples as varied as Mozart, Einstein, Darwin, Wren, Hemingway, Benares with the world wide web, and 'even the Beatles', in support of this claim, and he thought the only unequivocal exception was Isaac Newton.

This view was not entirely shared by members of the audience, and other exceptions were proposed: most notably Goethe and Einstein. A question was asked about the nature of inspiration, - is it a shift of consciousness? Another commentator felt the idea that if you work at it, you will eventually get to genius, is reductive and depressing. Genius peaks at different times and in different subjects. A final comment was made that the breakthrough to 'knowing' is of little value, without the capacity to communicate it.

On Saturday afternoon we had a choice of joining one of four small groups for presentations by individual members. In the one I went to, Marilyn Monk talked interestingly about weaving both propositional and implicate strands through her own life, in a career as an academic research scientist, as a follower of an Indian spiritual master, and through training in the Alexander technique, and Psychosynthesis.

After that we saw the new publicity video made by Amit Biswas aptly called 'What the Network is About,' described through interviews with our members. It does an excellent job of doing just that, will be available on the website, and hopefully also on 'youtube'.

Saturday evening was relaxed and enjoyable with some homemade entertainment finishing with a gentle circle dance, in readiness for the AGM on Sunday morning. This provides an important opportunity for members to hear about the work of the Board first hand, to express their views, and not least, to offer most sincere and heartfelt thanks and appreciation for the dedicated hard work, inspiration, and integrity that goes to making the Network what it is.

The proposal to reduce the maximum number of Board members from 12 to 10 was accepted, and the members now are: **Claudia Nielsen, Jacqui Nielsen**, re-elected



Andrew Robinson





Peter Fenwick, Chris Lyons and Max Payne

members **Bernard Carr** (Chairman,) **Chris Lyons**, **Martin Redfern**, newly elected member **Edi Billimoria**, and co-opted member **Ioannis Syrigos**, leaving one seat vacant for a member to be co-opted during the year. Olly Robinson continues to be a consultant to the Board. **Gerri McManus** and **Athar Yawar** stood down in March 2011.

A full programme of nine successful events took place last year, in addition to local meetings. Membership currently numbers just under 1500, with an increase of 80 this year, and 160 electronic members. We were reminded that the quality of members is as important as the quantity, but numbers are important particularly in view of the financial situation, which is a cause for concern. Costs substantially exceed income, and while the deficit was made up by a grant from the Trust, that means eating into capital as interest rates are so low, and is not sustainable. The decision to increase membership subscriptions for the first time in 10 years by 20% was taken reluctantly but as a matter of necessity. Comparably, it is still a very modest figure, and extraordinarily good value in the light of the quality of the Review, and the staggering amount of material available to

members on the website, which is in process of being updated by Ioannis Syrigos, who took over management of it last year. There will be a new system with additional important features such as a video and photo gallery, forums, the Newsletter, social media plug-ins (like Tweeter and Facebook) for advertising content, a graphical calendar and rotating news, and will be ready and functioning shortly.

Reflecting on the weekend, I am aware how immeasurably the Network has enriched my life over the last thirteen years or so, and what a privilege and pleasure it has been to be present at those conferences, talks, and gatherings, meeting people with opportunities for acquaintance to deepen and develop over time with renewed encounters. The stimulation of attending has inspired and stirred me to read, think, reflect, ponder, continue to develop and engage in processes of discovery and exploration, which I hope will continue for my forever. Thank you so much, SMN.

*Diana Williams was a psychotherapist, working integratively from a transpersonal perspective. Since writing this report, she died suddenly during the autumn.*

## The Balloon Story

Author: Anonymous

A man in a hot air balloon is lost. He sees a man on the ground and reduces height to speak to him.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where I am?"

"You're in a hot air balloon hovering thirty feet above this field," comes the reply.

"You must work in Information Technology," says the balloonist.

"I do," says the man, "How did you know?"

"Well," says the balloonist, "Everything you told me is technically correct, but it's no use to anyone."

"You must be in business," says the man.

"I am," says the balloonist, "How did you know?"

"Well," says the man, "You don't know where you are, you don't know where you're going, but you expect me to be able to help. You're in the same position you were before we met, but now it's my fault."

