

Report - The Annual Gathering, 2000

at Gaunts House, Dorset

A Personal Impression

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Around a hundred members of the SMN came together at Gaunts House for this memorable gathering, which was especially notable for its sense of comradeship and solidarity - it is hardly too strong to say love. Gaunts House is attractive and is set in beautiful countryside and the staff were very helpful. Although its accommodation falls short of standards offered by university campuses, entailing crowded dining rooms and, for most, shared bedrooms, these conditions of themselves, brought members together.

The gathering extended from Thursday afternoon 13 July, until teatime on Sunday 16 July, allowing time for members to meet and mix, but it was still a very full programme, beginning at 7.30 with meditation or gentle Pelatis exercises for the early risers. The party and entertainment on Saturday evening revealed the highly professional and varied talents of the members, among the more unexpected being an evocative 'Dance of the eight jackets' by HELEN FORD (she had some difficulty in retrieving them at the end of the performance) and the narration of a folk tale by SERENA RONEY-DOUGAL to superb mimed dancing and singing by CHARMIAN WYLDE accompanied by ED SARATH on flugelhorn and piano - a performance that would have been outstanding in any context.

In total contrast there was a deeply moving presentation by BART and MANEC VAN DER LUGT, with slides, entitled *Head and Heart in Dying: the Grace of Dying in Peace*. This had many members in tears. The presentation was of the days leading up to and following the death of Manec's mother at her home, surrounded by her family, including grandchildren. We were privileged to share in an unfolding domestic scene in which death took a natural and dignified place in the midst of the continuing life of a united and caring family. Few of us can hope to die in such a seemingly relaxed and caring context, but it had many lessons about the naturalness of death, in a culture where stress, distress, and often neglect, are its normal accompaniments.

As for other lectures and presentations, some were, of course, in parallel and so I could not attend them all. It is invidious to pick out any, but for me, ISSAC MATHAI's lecture on integrated medicine in India, Serena Roney-Dougal's *Walking between Worlds* and perhaps especially BRIAN BROOM's *Somatic Metaphors: a challenge to the Notion of Personhood and Disease Causation*, stood out as thought provoking. The idea that illness can have meaning in the life of a person is significant but that such illness can have metaphorical meaning raises very deep issues about whether meaning is enshrined at all levels of reality.

Underlying a number of presentations, and a recurring theme in the discussions, was a widespread awareness that we were in the midst of an immeasurable world-wide paradigm shift and that this had profound significance for the future of the Network which was playing a marked role in bringing it about. This paradigm shift has been manifested in the change in the status of the Network itself. Early in its life, it had been almost a clandestine society, and distinguished professional people needed to keep quiet about membership, whereas in many circles, it has now become almost a badge of honour. The recognition of growing spiritual awareness world-wide underlined the enormous future potential of the Network

and its work and the continuing need for it to adapt to express it. Somehow, we had to manifest and promote the vanguard of emerging new insights and understanding, yet we had not to get so far ahead as to embarrass professional people. It was recognised also that there was a need to balance and reflect the spectrum of concerns of members ranging from the sometimes very significant and intellectually revealing manifestations of the paranormal to deep spiritual experiences. Similarly, there was a need to balance concerns of some members for detached scientific enquiry and the often very personal aspirations of others for life-transforming experiences; and there was awareness, too, that in opening ourselves to the forces involved, there could be hidden dangers.

The member's forum was revealing and many issues were raised that pointed to the future. So far as further conferences were concerned, there was a need for something between the organised lectures and presentations and spontaneous chats between individual members. This could take the form of groups organised as need arose, to discuss issues of interest and where members could get feedback from others. One such group, organised during the conference by DIANA FYNN on near-death experiences, set an example. As for local groups, there was the potential for many more, embracing not only members and associate members but perhaps satellite groups including potential members and others: they might in some way be affiliated to the SMN and perhaps allowed to buy the review.

Throughout the entire conference, there was a deeply felt awareness and gratitude for the great wisdom and energy shown in guiding the Network over so many years, by our retiring chairman, PETER FENWICK, and our Director, DAVID LORIMER. They had set a standard of balance, courage and openness to the emerging scene that will be difficult to equal in coming years. Yet, though there was deep regret at the retirement from the chair of Peter, and the changing role of David, we were reassured that they would both still be with us and there was a warm welcome for CHRIS CLARKE, JULIAN CANDY and our new Director of Administration, GRAHAM GORDON, whose appointment was welcomed by everyone to whom I spoke. There were also warm tributes not only to LOUISE INNES, who had borne the brunt of organising the conference, but also to other staff who had left the Network and to HUGH BRETNALL who had joined us.

This millennium gathering was momentous, not only in itself, but because of the awareness of all present that we were at a critical point in a transition that would have profound effects on the future of the Network, and that it was a microcosm of a change that, with its help, was taking place world-wide. There was, therefore, a need on the part of us all for openness to guidance and wisdom from the forces that transcend us.

Dr Crawford Knox is author of Changing Christian Paradigms and their Implications for Modern Thought.