



Is Heaven for Real? The Significant Implications of Near Death Experiences

29–31 July 2016

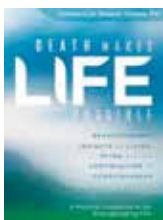
Natalie Tobert

This marvellous event at University of Winchester, was hosted by the Institute of Theological Partnerships, in association with the Scientific and Medical Network. The conference was the original idea of Shirley Firth based on her research into anomalous experiences, and it was introduced by theologian Prof Lisa Isherwood. The aim was to explore near death experiences, religious experiences, and the nature of consciousness, then discuss implications for theology and other disciplines. The topic was of particular relevance to those working with the sick, dying, and bereaved (and of course I considered it had implications for mental wellbeing).



David Lorimer's talk covered the beginnings of New Thought in the Western world, starting with the USA in the late 1800s, with ideas about the primacy of consciousness. There was an assumption that Western culture lost sight of the inner world. David noted that in the West we learn much about physical laws, but we don't seem to know as much about the spiritual or moral laws which govern existence. He

explored Empathetic Resonance, with its concepts of shared consciousness, morphic resonance, telepathy, connection, and psychometry, with some discussion of non-local mind. He gave examples of Western writers and their ideas about consciousness, subconscious, and super consciousness. He considered the current chaos in the outer world (in UK and USA) was a manifestation of inner fear, and we might learn to modify our thought patterns.



After supper we watched a film by anthropologist **Marilyn Schlitz**: "Death Makes Life Possible". She suggested that if we contemplated our death it would allow us to live life more completely. If we face our own mortality might this inspire us to live more fully, and reduce our fear of death?

The film suggested death was our birthright: it occurred like a leaf falls from a tree which fertilises the ground. It explored life and death, and the nature of consciousness, from various cultural perspectives. We saw interviews with mental health experts and cultural leaders, discussing how we might live without fearing death, with one inspiring story of a man who was facing his own early demise.

The following morning, we listened to Dutch cardiologist **Pim van Lommel** speaking on non-local consciousness: he was conducting full-time research on the relationship



between mind and brain. In the past the old reductionist assumption was that it was impossible to experience consciousness during cardiac arrest, when circulation and breathing stopped. In earlier times patients were reluctant to mention NDE, as they believed their physicians wouldn't understand. Today with our better resuscitation techniques, when people have cardiac arrest, they don't die but report visions. He suggested ELE (deathbed visions) may be identical to NDE, and called them spiritual transformative experiences 'STEs', which are culturally and religiously ubiquitous.

Pim presented four prospective studies with 562 patients who were all survivors of cardiac arrest. In a study of 344 patients, 82% had no NDE, while 18% (62 patients) had an NDE. In a longitudinal study, there were significant changes in people with an NDE: enhanced intuitive sensitivity and paranormal experiences. He mentioned a few negative experiences and noted the fear of being sectioned if one talked about experiences.

He claimed out of body experiences were not hallucinations, delusions or illusions: they were veridical perceptions. Elements that occurred during cardiac arrest included OBEs, life preview, life review, deceased relatives, understanding the thoughts of bystanders, clairvoyance, clairvoyance, and loss of the fear of death. Thoughts were not wiped out with lack of brain activity.

Pim noted the impact of consciousness on health care, end of life care, terminal illness and prolonging life, euthanasia, and organ donation, and he commented on striking similarities between those with near death experiences, and people sectioned for psychosis and schizophrenia. I wondered whether the symptoms of those diagnosed with psychosis or schizophrenia, were having anomalous experiences, but with anxiety and distress?



Tanya Garland spoke about the NDE she had during the birth of her first child when she was in full labour. She thought she was dying, but was calm, and heard a voice saying: 'ask for help'. When she opened her eyes she found her centre of perception was close to the ceiling. She saw the room from above and observed the heads of the nurses, but the voice told her to return to her baby and her children. The experience

had a profound effect on her and was life changing: she realised she was a spiritual being. She had heightened awareness and clairvoyance, but there was nobody she would talk to about it.

At the start of question time we experienced a spooky arrival of Peter Fenwick, who was calling in remotely on Skype. This caused much merriment in the audience, who had been sitting for two hours without a break.



Speaking remotely from Croatia, **Peter Fenwick** mentioned his work with Near Death Experiences. He gave a slideshow illustrating the history of near death experiences including the works of Raymond Moody and Kenneth Ring, Michael Sabom, and Bruce Greyson. He noted NDEs could occur at any time, not necessarily at death. Interspersed with his gentle jokes,

he showed us video clips of interviews with people who had had experiences, including those of profound light, common to people undergoing the dying process.

What can we learn about consciousness after death? What is the significance of these transformative experiences? Peter reminded us that 4% of intense experiences were from people with psychosis, although people with negative experiences tended not to respond to questionnaires on NDE if they had had a horrific experience. He suggested that negative experiences may have different causes (and of course I disagreed with this). He noted new developments in psychiatry, with more understanding of spiritual crisis which used to be identified with schizophrenia, medicated and drugged.

However, he appeared to assume that psychosis was a hallucination or a delusion. My assumptions are different. I assume the terminology used depends on an observer's beliefs. Perhaps the enhanced consciousness and intuition he mentioned is also part of spiritual awakening, comparable to the symptoms of those sectioned with psychosis or schizophrenia? There seems to be a fast changing attitude amongst some medical professionals to new ways of thinking (Razzaque 2014, Stockmann 2015).

What is the difference in the content and phenomenology of people who have positive and negative experiences, what is the relationship with psychosis? If people are repressed, oppressed, and suppressed are their anomalous experiences more likely to manifest with distress and be identified as psychosis and schizophrenia (Tobert 2016a)?



Marianne Rankin spoke in the late afternoon. She has written the most comprehensive book on Religious Experiences (2008), and she noted people did not need to be near death to have an NDE, which were also called spiritual or religious experience. In the Alister Hardy society archive there were many examples

of religious and spiritual experiences (which she called RSE). People had a profound experience of light.

She introduced Sir Alister Hardy as a biologist who believed the spiritual was a natural part of consciousness. He devoted his life to enquiring about deeper understandings

and wanted to demonstrate that religious experience played an important role in human behaviour, and was widespread in all cultures. He collected people's narratives about their experiences, and was sent 3,000 narratives that people had not dared speak about before. Today the archive holds over 6,000 narratives, which is online and searchable. He believed religious experiences were universal, and received the Templeton Prize for his research.

Emerging themes

During the discussion on themes arising from the conference, the speakers noted there was an increasing sense of interconnectedness and interdependence between humans; an awareness of the mind/brain relationship and how to communicate evidence of experiences; a greater awareness of spiritual experience and transformation; and fewer taboos against speaking out.

This material can transform our approaches to death and our care of the dying. On the subject of euthanasia: there were issues around choice and time of death; fear of death; problems of over-medication; and the need for patient autonomy.

Participants felt there was a need for greater discussion on how we can spread the word about these experiences, so students learn more about it in universities and medical schools. They wanted to challenge old paradigm concepts, and address a younger audience. There is a problem if death is equated with extinction, whereas NDE material suggested continuity. Another issue is the phenomenology of religious and spiritual experience and NDEs can be compared to people who've been diagnosed with psychosis.

Sunday

Early on Sunday morning I walked through the cemetery by the University, past the graves overgrown by summer grasses, watching butterflies and bees settle on flowers as the sun was rising.



Paul Badham said it was good for Christians to be concerned with near death experiences and he wanted religious experiences to be part of the Christian message, as life after death was central to Christian belief. Beliefs in resurrection of the dead stem from Christ's rising, and while some believed it would happen to all people in the future, others believed Jesus was unique. Christians talk about resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul. Resurrection and immortality need each other, as the soul provides continuity as a bridge.

NDEs offer evidence of a future life, and are important for religion: to die is not to expire. They provided evidence that the Christian story may actually have a real base in history. At one point Paul knocked over his glass of water, and gave the lecture hall carpet an ablution. He mentioned the commonalities with other cultures and in other continents, where people's ideas of a future life were shaped by those who actually had experiences of NDEs.

Paul noted the word God meant different things to different people. NDEs matter for Christians, Muslims, Tibetans, Buddhists, and Hindus because they suggest a way in between lives that humans can grow and develop. He said we were exploring information about the pre-existence of the soul, rather than about reincarnation, and he noted we can argue that those who have religious experiences are of sound and stable mind. Members of the audience were grateful Paul had covered a lifetime's work in a few moments of his lecture.

This was a refreshing talk for me to hear with stunning scholarship and a crisp intellect, with clarity of presentation. It made me think again, is it possible that those who are

diagnosed with psychosis or schizophrenia are experiencing religious experiences? Today, thousands of people on social media are angry that they have been sectioned or medicated by psychiatric services. They are claiming their auditory and visual experiences are part of spiritual awakening, and are the same phenomena as religious experiences.



Patrick Gaffney spoke about the Tibetan Book of the Dead, presenting a series of transitional realities which occur continually through life and death. He mentioned the importance of different strands of the Bardo. There is one that covers our experiences during our life through death.

Buddha experienced a state of profound peace, and he realised that all humans had the possibility to achieve that same state. Patrick said “we are here to awaken from the delusion of separateness”. The message of the Buddhist path is of compassion, selflessness, and wisdom, with the view that there are many lives and a continuum of consciousness. Human life offers the opportunity for spiritual growth, and at the moment of death he says the ground luminosity arises.

The second Bardo is of dying and death. This involves the body's outer dissolution, and at this time people experience visions, while consciousness dissolves into space. Then there is the inner dissolution of a white experience, where our thoughts disappear and consciousness fades. Consciousness is transferred into wisdom in all sentient beings, who surrender to the ground luminosity.

The third Bardo is one of intrinsic reality. Rather than the old way of dying by going into unconsciousness, with this clarity

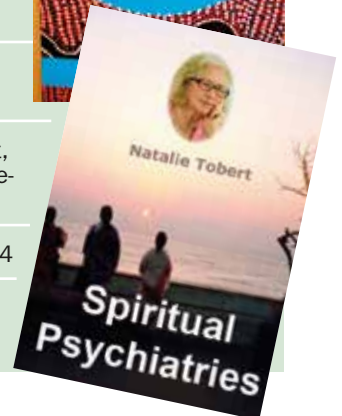
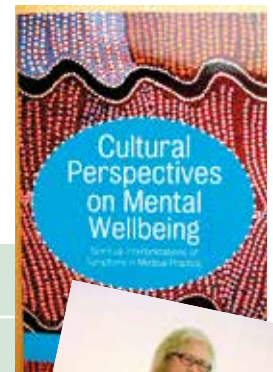
of mind arrives before dawn, and we have four opportunities to be liberated. At this point the seeds of our habitual tendencies are reawakened: the mental body, the mind, and the space between births. The direction we move in is determined by our past karma, which may perpetuate set patterns if we believe they are real. Sometimes we don't realise we have died, but when we become aware we are dead, some may develop a longing for a physical body.

For 21 days we receive impressions of our previous life, and at this time the living can help through prayer. After 21 days as a future life approaches, there is something similar to a life review. Then we become connected to a womb and develop a new life, by experiencing ground luminosity. There are some similarities to the near death experience: tunnels of darkness; clear light after death; seeing of relatives; experience of the mental body travelling through time and space.

The point of the Bardo writings is they offer us a tool to transform our life and death experiences, our future lives and the future of humanity. Patrick asked if an NDE was like standing on the edge of Bardo, getting a preview of that state of being.

I was very grateful to be present at this particular event with the clarity and range of speakers. Though I am still left wondering, could it be that some people can access a Bardo state without being dead? It seems people who have what is termed a psychotic experience have a trauma trigger, either post-natal, or pre-incarnational. This is my particular concern, and I discuss this and many allied points of view, in my new book on Cultural Perspectives on Mental Wellbeing (Tobert 2016b).

Medical anthropologist **Dr Natalie Tobert** offers training on *Spiritual and Cultural Equalities in hospitals, medical schools and universities (India, Sweden, Switzerland, UK, and USA)*. Her most recent book **Cultural Perceptions on Mental Wellbeing (2016)** explores spiritual interpretations of anomalous experiences and mental well being



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“My grandfather once told me that there were two kinds of people: those who do the work and those who take the credit. He told me to try to be in the first group; there was much less competition.”

Indira Gandhi, Indian prime minister



Convergent Evolution, Attractors and Love

David Lorimer

<https://explore.scimednet.org/groups/rome-meeting-convergent-evolution-attractors-and-love-sept-30th-2nd-oct-2016/>



The 2016 Network Continental Meeting took place in Rome at the end of September and was attended by some 25 members, with 14 presentations over two days on a wide range of themes (see abstracts online). The theme had its genesis in the presentation given at the 2015 Beyond the Brain conference given by **Dr Ulisse di Corpo** and **Antonella Vannini** on Syntropy – the paragraph below describes the theme in broad terms:

In 1941 the mathematician Luigi Fantappiè introduced a new type of causality into the explanation of life and evolution. The equations which combine quantum mechanics and special relativity show that, in addition to causality, retrocausality is also an ingredient of our universe. Whereas causality is governed by the law of entropy (diverging tendency), retrocausality is governed by a symmetrical law which leads to the increase of differentiation, complexity and structures. Combining the two Greek words syn=converging and tropos=tendency Fantappiè coined the word syntropy in order to describe the retrocausal action of attractors, the converging tendency of evolution towards a final unifying cause which he named love. A similar description was developed by Teilhard de Chardin and named Omega Point and by Carl Jung and Wolfgang Pauli, who called it synchronicity. The aim of the conference is to promote the sharing of contributions in this domain both in the scientific field and in the humanities and arts.

In this brief reflection I highlight some of the main themes emerging from the conference presentations and discussions. Network meetings are always about extending our ideas about reality beyond the limitations of scientific materialism, with a particular focus on the nature of consciousness. This in turn has implications about the spiritual nature of the human being.

One important theme explained by **Phoebe Wyss** was synchronicity or meaningful coincidence. The standard scientific view excludes purpose and meaning, so coincidences are simply random chance events (Aristotle's final causality is set aside). As also elaborated by Richard Tarnas in *Cosmos and Psyche*, the key is that there is no sharp distinction between what we call inner and outer; rather they reflect and interact with each other, so synchronicity is an expression of this.

This in turn implies an underlying intelligence as stated as far back as the 1930s by Max Planck and Sir James Jeans, among others. Phoebe referred to the one Cosmic Mind in which we all participate, an idea elaborated by New Thought thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Trine, Thomas Troward and Charles Haanel more than a hundred years ago. Archetypes can be understood as ordering principles of our inner reality. Phoebe proposed that astrology gives a broad framework of meaning.

A more recent model is David Bohm's relationship between the implicate (enfolded) and explicate (unfolded) orders where unity and connectedness is primary and separation secondary. The implicate order reflects and conveys coherence and convergence. The latter as an evolutionary trend was well articulated by Teilhard de Chardin. This trend is well worth recalling in the chaos of the events reported daily in the news – fragmentation and assertion of separate identities. The reality of holons balances separateness with integration. Fractals also illustrate this part-whole resonance.

Observer and experimenter effects imply a co-creative and participatory view of reality rather than a sharp distinction between subjective and objective – I already referred to this in terms of inner and outer. Discussions on these themes within the Network go back more than 20 years and are also well articulated in the epilogue of Richard Tarnas' *Passion of the Western Mind* and in the Goethean science developed by Brian Goodwin and Stephan Harding at Schumacher College. The work on PK at the Princeton PEAR lab also demonstrates the power of intention as focused thought. This is arguably a non-material influence on the material world.

Tuvi Orbach developed this theme of intention, postulating a 5th dimension of information and attractors where a blueprint in this dimension can interact with attractors so an intention for future is an attractor for the present. He gave examples of humans planning a house and birds a nest – the latter as an example of future purpose in nature. He pointed out that 4 random changes are much more likely to lead to entropy while epigenetics demonstrates adaptation and improvement. He also stressed the centrality of co-creation in global mind change.

Both **Christian McMillan** and **Paul Hague** referred to the journey from separation to wholeness. Bergson criticised finalism as another form of determinism – if materialism pushes deterministically from the past, finalism pulls deterministically from the future. This idea excludes creative novelty, a point that exercised Whitehead and leads David Ray Griffin to reject precognition in principle, despite a proliferation of evidence. Ulisse would see this in terms of attractors from the future – in this sense a vision of the future is also an attractor towards which we are trying to move, although the path is not predetermined. For him, synchronicity is a pull from the future. He highlighted the following key polarities or complementarities:

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| ■ Entropy/Syntropy |
| ■ Cause/Attractor |
| ■ Divergence/Convergence |
| ■ Visible/Invisible |
| ■ Unconscious/Superconscious |

Fields were mentioned by a number of speakers as formative and ordering principles, including the akashic field from the work of Ervin Laszlo; also family fields from family constellations. Perhaps both are 'knowing fields'. Fields connect us in various ways. For Ulisse, increased influence of the invisible world results in more synchronicities. If we align ourselves non-dually with the Universe, then we can reach our full potential and expression as a human being. **Richard Blasband** also referred to the power of the invisible in the role of the etheric body in the genesis and recurrence of disease – if the cancer pattern is still in the etheric, it is more likely to recur.

Pier Luigi Luisi reminded us that complex systems are networks of interactions and relationships where there is no centre of command. He found the Buddhist view congenial in this respect. Here there is co-dependent arising and feedback, with no initial cause. Dynamic interactive processes reflect impermanence and transformation at all levels of life, including humans. This view reminds us of the importance of processes and relationships, also within the Network; also that health is expressed as dynamic balance.

Hardin Tibbs showed how time cannot in fact be detected or measured. From his angle as a futurist, he remarked that most of his colleagues were Newtonian or Laplacean with a rather deterministic idea of the future. However, we know that there are intrinsic limits to prediction, especially with nonlinear or wicked problems. Many policy makers are systems illiterate – universities specialise in linear critical analysis. Hardin also asked what it would be like if we knew the consequences of our actions in advance, holding up a 'moral mirror' corresponding to reports of the life review where we re-experience events multi-dimensionally, not simply from our own point of view. With anticipatory hindsight we might choose differently in either case.

Our orientation to the future exhibits both fear and anxiety as well as hope and trust. **Christos Sideras** reviewed the history of hope, drawing on a number of sources. Christians live in the hope of renewal and forgiveness, and despair (*desespoir* in French where *espoir* is hope). We are more familiar with the politics of fear than hope, with its emphasis on negative campaigning. These polarities recall the fear and love loops of the International Futures Forum, created at Schumacher College by Brian Goodwin and his students in the wake of 9/11 (see diagram below and www.internationalfuturesforum.com). To live in hope is also to live in the unknown, in humility.

Both Ulisse and I spoke about the invisible force or energy of love – with reference to syntropy and the work of Peter Deunov, Gandhi and Pitirim Sorokin. We underestimate the power of love even though we all experience it. Deunov's vision was one of a culture of love and wisdom that can act as an attractor

and compass direction for our efforts. Deunov said: "Love is necessary for the transformation of the world. It is the only force which can bring peace between the nations, each of which has a mission to accomplish on earth." And former Congressman Dennis Kucinich sums it up well:

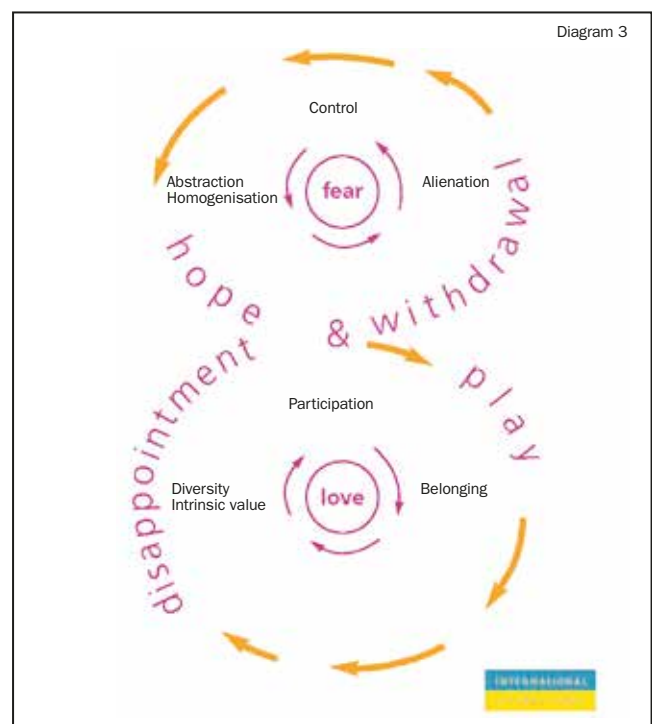
The world is multidimensional. The new vision is a holistic one that understands the power of intention and the power of co-operation, of mutuality, of trust, of seeing the world as one. That vision then becomes our outer reality. Ours is the ability, through our consciousness, to create peace, to create love. The organ of transformation is the human heart because there is nothing - no weapon ever made - that is more powerful than a human heart.

The Love and Fear Loops: source, www.internationalfuturesforum.com

In our final session we reflected that the prevalence of the mechanistic paradigm is at the root of our crisis. Correspondingly, extended states of consciousness are not understood by academe.

Among emerging recommendations from the conference that have wider implications for the Network were:

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| ■ Realise that we live in a co-creative universe |
| ■ Our intentions and visions can manifest in outer reality |
| ■ Work in a homoeopathic way – small scale to begin with |
| ■ Pay attention to synchronicities in terms of keeping on track |
| ■ Think about the role of social media in the SMN networking global mind change |
| ■ Think and act out the box – cultivate your creativity |
| ■ Live your life mindfully and lovingly – engage mind, heart and will |
| ■ Live what we want to move forward – be the change we want to see |





The World Congress of Faiths and Sarum College Promoting Spiritual Life: an interfaith perspective

“All We Need Is Love!”

Larry Culliford



Photograph of Thomas Merton. Used with permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University.

Peter Fenwick welcomed Paul Filmore as our new Chair and presented him with the glass plaque ornamented with the names of his predecessors and entrusted it to him for the duration of his period of office. Paul received it and suitably responded.

Peter Fenwick paid tribute to the late Karl Pribram (1919-2015), an honorary member of SMN. A prominent and creative neurophysiologist, his vision of a holographic universe led him to discern in one part of a brain the possibility of seeing the whole. Unusually for a brain surgeon he moved on into neurological research. He authored over seven hundred books and scientific papers, *The Holotropic Brain* being of particular significance. A time of silence in his memory was observed.

Peter also reported on the recent Conference in Tucson, Arizona, where the original theme of previous conferences had been amended from ‘Towards a Science of Consciousness’ to ‘The Science of Consciousness’. He noted that new theories continue to emerge. He drew our attention to the work of Jeffrey Martin of Harvard on happiness and awakening, and ‘Finders’ courses he had instigated. Peter would be running an internet based course before too long.

He noted two proportions had emerged which he commended too is. The first: For every philosopher there is an equal and opposite philosopher. The second: All philosophers are wrong.

Richard Irwin reported on the development of the SMN website which the Board hoped would be more helpful and informative to all. Later an instructive detailed presentation was made for interested members. Janine Edge reported briefly of the work of the SMN Charitable Trust and detailed procedures for the members Form at the AGM on Sunday.

On Saturday morning we had two talks. **Chris Thomson** spoke on *Conscious Evolution: from the Esoteric to the Exoteric*. He discerns five significant trends in our evolution (which he defines as heritable successful adaptation) of which we can be conscious and have profound implications for science. He sees changes that can be discerned in or physical organism; our consciousness and intelligence; knowledge and understanding; character development toward greater truthfulness and capability; growth in capacity and ability. He illustrated these with verbal and pictorial examples. He summed up by suggesting that we may be able to observe the following: the growth of self-determination, the impossible becoming possible, the complex becoming simple, the esoteric becoming exoteric, and the paranormal becoming normal.

He envisaged future evolution as manifesting the combination of both physical and non-physical consciousness; deeper understanding reconciling science and esoteric knowledge; individuals with the courage to be as they really are; and greater and more widespread demonstration of practical and embodied wisdom bringing ideals into concrete manifestation.

Dr Mick Collins’ title was *Doing and the Next Evolutionary Threshold*. Mick is an Occupational Therapist, recently retired

from full-time teaching at the University of East Anglia. His book *The Unselfish Spirit* describes his thesis. He explored the importance of ‘doing’ in times of spiritual crisis. He described his own personal journey and how he could make his interior experience relate to wider society. He had been influenced by the teachings of Buddhism, J. Krishnamurti and Carl Jung. He spoke of the transformative role of our imaginative capacity. He quoted Jacob Bronowski’s remark that ‘The imagination is like a telescope in time’, and from Humberto Maturana, ‘Everything we do is a structural dance in the choreography of co-existence’, and Buckminster Fuller ‘I seem to be a verb’.

He drew further on Herbert Marcuse and on Carl Jung. These and others had pointed out that industrial culture had lost sight of the inner world of myth, ritual, connectedness, spirituality, and the numinous. In the light of crises in his own journey Mick told of his visit to Jung’s tower at Bollingen and of further significant experiences that had led him on both personally and professionally. He invited us to reflect on the question as to the reality of our *daimon* and our relationship with it. He wanted to define *eudaimonia* as ‘blessing’ rather than just happiness, and that ‘doing’ was as vital as ‘being’, and that ‘doing in depth’ was the key.

In the shorter session we heard a fascinating presentation from **Degard** on her development of ‘Aetheric’ Art using example of her own work of portraiture but stressing the application of her concept of ‘Aethericism’ in all the arts. **Marilyn Monk**, a stalwart of the work of SMN, spoke on the Alexander Technique and its importance in the evolution of consciousness. Your reporter, whose bi-location techniques are somewhat rusty, did not hear the presentations of **Clement Jewitt** and **Edi Bilimoria** (the latter standing in at short notice for a speaker who was unable to attend) but was assured that were of interest and stimulating to those who attended. **John Poynton**, whose book on Michael Whiteman was reviewed in *Network Review No.120*, spoke on Evolution and Psychic Ability. Drawing on his professional insights as a zoologist he raised issues on the alleged psychic abilities of animals, but more importantly on ethical and social questions that might arise if psychic abilities became more widespread in our culture. Might such trends be a revolution in the making?

Richard Irwin introduced us to a healing meditation through recorded music of his own composition which related to the chakras through the ancient modal scales. A welcome opportunity to experience rest at deeper levels after a busy and stimulating day.

On Sunday, after the formalities of the AGM, Mick Collins introduced the Members’ Forum with an exercise involving us in groups of two. Under the firm hand of **Janine Edge** (who restrained members of the Board from pre-emptive strikes) we then engaged in a discussion of a wide variety of topics. Creative and constructive ideas on the future of the Network were aired. Peter Fenwick drew this part of the proceedings, and then the Gathering, to a close with his usual panache, thanking all who had taken part.