

The Conference of the International Transpersonal Association

John Rowan

The subtitle of the conference was 'Toward Earth Community: Ecology, Native Wisdom and Spirituality', and it was held in Killarney. The brochure was green, and decorated with many Celtic symbols. I thought I was in for a rich feast of mythology and symbolism, ritual and attention to place. Wrong.

The first plenary was held in a tent called the Marquis, pronounced marquee. It was big, and had a good sound system and screens to show the image of the speaker. The opening ceremony started by thanking everyone, and telling us that we were 1500 people from 39 countries. There was indeed a ritual, involving about five people, and we did all sing a brief song. Several people spoke, including Ralph Metzner, one of the organisers, someone from the Hopi Indians, a Green Party spokesperson and we had a message from Mary Robinson, the President of Ireland. So far a bit ambiguous, but quite promising.

I wanted to hear Roger Walsh, because he is one of the senior people in the transpersonal movement, and has edited a couple of books in the area. He mentioned that Ken Wilber divides the transpersonal

into three great areas — the Centaur, the Subtle and the Causal. For those who are not familiar with this, the Centaur is all about bodymind unity, peak experiences, and the healing of the splits in the person, leading to a state of personal autonomy. The Subtle is the area of the collective unconscious, with a multiplicity of myths, stories, rituals and so on, including a lot of interest in standing stones and wells. The Conference blurb was full of this kind of imagery. The Causal is the area where we give up any kind of reliance on symbols and images, and go for pure contact with the Divine. This is the area of the mystical unity with the Divine which has been talked about by such people as Eckhart in the West and Shankara in the East. What Roger Walsh did was to spend all his time talking about the Causal, and meditation as the main route to the it, speaking of the Subtle as a station on the way. I was disappointed by this, and told him so.

I enjoyed much more the contribution of Angeles Arrien, who spoke very movingly about the Basque culture, and the way in which it has retained the old sense of community which has been lost in so

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many parts of the world. Another one I went to was Vandana Shiva, an activist in the world of ecological action, who I thought was very impressive.

Almost the only experiential event in the conference was the Labyrinth. This was a cloth reproduction, laid out on the floor of a church hall, of the Chartres maze. Like all the traditional labyrinths, going back to the old pagan worship, it is not a puzzle. You walk it as a ritual: the convoluted path takes you to the centre, and then you come out again the way you came in. I walked it in the pagan way, where you give up something at each turn, so that you arrive at the centre with nothing at all. Then you open yourself up to the Goddess, and wait for what might happen. This was the high spot of the conference for me.

There were two good sessions on eco-psychology, one by Allen Kanner and Mary Gomes, and the other by Robert Greenway. These were the only sessions I went to where the audience was allowed to ask questions!

The session by Frances Vaughan contained some good quips. One was where she said that the Buddhists believed in Dukkha (suffering), Anicca (constant change) and Anatta (no permanent self). 'A rough translation of this would be: Life is tough; everything changes, but don't take it personally!' There was also a nice quote, which she said came from Niebuhr: 'The good in people makes democracy possible. The evil in people makes democracy necessary.' I liked that. But then she

went on to assume that the Causal is what the transpersonal is really about — again going against the grain of the conference aims.

David Lukoff talked very well about psychosis and mysticism, the similarities and differences. Then I went to hear Ram Dass, saying things like: 'Service is joy. Do you need your life story? The secret is to care and not to care.'

The Stan Grof presentation was rather dull, I thought; nothing I had not heard before. Making the connections between politics and perinatal experience which David Wasdell in this country has been talking about for years.

One of the best presentations I went to was by Jane Middleton-Moz, on sexual abuse and other childhood traumas. Marvellous woman with a lot of her own life experience included. 'When people are oppressed, they often feel helpless to attack the oppressor, so they turn on each other, finding weaker ones to shame and hurt.'

Perhaps the most striking presentation was the last one I went to, by John Mack, who has studied UFO abductions, and believes that they really happened. A sober man, with lots of good evidence. Why don't I believe in them?

All in all, plenty of stimulation — and I met about twenty people I had met before in various earlier settings. The space for mixing and mingling was good, and the whole thing well organised. So mixed feelings and very varied impressions. If there were another one tomorrow, and I could go free, I don't think I would go.