Beyond the Light — The Ultimate Identity Crisis

Shakespeare, the Goddess and Douglas Harding on trial

John Wren-Lewis

Most psychologists think creation-myths express processes of the inner life rather than primitive cosmological speculations or religious revelations. I believe they are even more specific than that.

I think they all originated as attempts to articulate the essential mystical or transpersonal experience, which in modem jargon might be described as the ultimate identity crisis. It is an individual's sudden discovery, through some kind of vital shock, that he/she isn't, and never was, just an isolated personal consciousness struggling to survive in an alien world (and a half-way alien society of other separate persons); he/she is, and always was, Infinity focusing down to a local point in order to experience Infinitude as multiplicity, a game of 'selfing'. That's why the creation-myths nearly all begin with the great dark: because, to individual consciousness, Infinity-as-such can't be experienced in any other way than as the transcendence of all possible form. Even the wonderful light commonly thought to represent God is still only a kind of form; and Infinity transcends that too.

Based on my own knowledge, I think near-death experiences or

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NDEs are precisely this kind of mystical identity-crisis, the death of the illusory separate self-identity and rebirth into recognition of a new identity as 'Infinity selfing'. It's my suspicion that when the dark is experienced as a tunnel leading to a wonderful light, it's not a route into heaven beyond the grave, it's the Dark focusing down into the play of finitude, of which light is the primal form; the heavenly visions aren't of another world; they are the mind's efforts to get itself around what *this* world is really like when experienced mystically. The regretful 'return from heaven' is the struggle of individual consciousness to readjust to a body-mind still heavily conditioned to its old false identity as separate selfhood, and the rest of the experiencer's life becomes an effort to unlearn that old conditioning.

In NDEs, the identity-crisis itself is cushioned by bodily unconsciousness, which is why the overwhelming majority of such experiencers report feelings of unbelievable peace and happiness — the peace and happiness of Infinity, no less. If for some reason or other the identity-change hits a person in waking life it might well at first seem horrifying, and I have a theory that in the Book of Genesis we actually have an account of one such — perhaps the very one that in due course became elaborated into the famous creation-myth with which Genesis begins. In Chapter 15 we hear how Abram, facing a classic mid-life crisis in relation to his future as a tribal patriarch, experienced a kind of fit while praying at sunset, 'and a great horror of darkness fell upon him'. Hebrew scholars tell me that the original word for horror carries overtones of numinous awe, rather than a Stephen King movie, but in the event the experience led Abram to change his name to Abraham and announce an entirely new relationship to the Infinite. My hunch is that when he later recollected his experience in tranquillity and retold it to his heirs, that numinous darkness became the 'darkness on the face of the deep' which is the Infinite Origin of everything; later generations developed the story into a full-scale history of the world's beginning, with the tale of Adam and Eve thrown in to explain how alienated selfhood came to be the normal human identity.

All of which is by way of personal introduction — long, but I think necessary — to two important recent books about two very different (yet subtly related) kinds of mystical identity crisis. One is a semi-fictional account of a man on trial for his life because society considers his mystical identity a dangerous blasphemy: it's the latest publication of a writer well-known to many *Self & Society* readers, Douglas Harding, the incredible English octogenarian sage who succeeded in charming arch-sceptic Philip Adams when he came to Australia four years ago. The other book is by England's poet laureate, Ted Hughes, and is a fascinating interpretation of Shakespeare's poems and plays as a working-through of the Swan of Avon's own mystical identity crisis. They are two of the most important books I've read in a long time, with a great deal to say (in their very different ways) about consciousness, and they say it much more entertainingly than is common for writing in our field.

Just in case anyone reading this doesn't know about Douglas Harding, he's been described as a Zen Master Without Portfolio; he enjoys the twin distinctions of being hailed as a genius by scholars around the world, and of having featured in the pop music charts (in a song called

'the man without a head' by the British group, The Incredible String Band). For over 40 years he's been writing, lecturing and conducting workshops with the aim of showing others how to discover their mystical identity. Like some of the great classical Zen masters (whom he doesn't resemble in any other way) he keeps insisting it's so absolutely obvious that only a very simple exercise is needed to 'get it': ignore the way you've been taught by others to think about yourself and the world, and simply 'experience your experience'. In every book he comes up with new ingenious tricks for doing this, but until this latest one, *The Trial of the Man Who Said He Was God*, he's said virtually nothing about how he himself managed it in the first place; when quizzed, he usually insists that for him there never was any single big experience, like an NDE or a 'horror of darkness'. Now, for the first time, he allows himself to be personal — still in an elliptical fashion, but one which in my opinion might turn out very helpful to those many readers who've enjoyed his earlier books yet never really 'got it' from his exercises.

He tells the tale from two sides, and the purely factual side is relegated to a brief autobiographical postscript. As I understand this, he came to grasp his true mystical identity somewhere in his late teens because the ordinary identity presented to him by his family and friends, all exclusive Plymouth Brethren of the most extreme fundamentalist dye, was simply not believable! His account, for all its brevity, is so vivid that most readers will have difficulty understanding how his parents, sister and other sect members managed to take themselves seriously in that human role! Yet their very exclusivity meant that he was offered only one alternative, since the materials for ordinary secular doubt just weren't there; he had to start hearing those Bible stories in a new way, and begin taking things like Jesus saying 'I and the Father are one, and if you abide in me, I abide in you', with a kind of seriousness the others hadn't ever imagined. He doesn't tell us in detail how it actually happened, but at 21 he felt bound to confront the family with the fact that other religions seemed to be saying the same thing, which led to his being tried for blasphemy and thrown out of home, penniless and with a hell-curse on his head.

This provides the emotional substratum for the main body of the book, a blow-by-blow story about the fictional trial of a Harding-like character called John Noakes, set in the year 2003. The British government has had to pass laws against blasphemy, with the death penalty as an option, as the only way of preventing fundamentalist groups from all religions taking matters into their own hands with executions, following the lead established by the Muslims in the affair of *The Satanic Verses* a decade earlier. One or two long-standing Harding readers have told me they found the book disappointing, because they saw it as a far-fetched literary device to enable Harding, through the mouth of Noakes conducting his own defence at the New Bailey, to answer every objection (logical, scientific, philosophical, theological or ethical) ever raised against his ideas in his 40 years of writing. I think this does the book much less than justice, on two levels.

Firstly, on the factual plane, I wish I were convinced that the literary device could be written off as merely far-fetched. I had a long talk with Salman Rushdie when he was here in 1984, and if he's a blas-

phemer, then I'm Shirley Maclaine — yet the poor chap still lives under threat of assassination because he wrote a novel that has characters openly saying what many people think about some of the nastier aspects of religion. And it's not just a Muslim problem: Harding assures us in his Postscript that the Brethren have actually got more tyrannical, not more broadminded, in the half-century since his ordeal. So beware, all you tolerant transpersonalists! The psychological forces that produce fundamentalist violence are far from dead, and it's in the nature of violence that it can so readily get its way over tolerance. The spiritual hunger of materialist society can easily get side-tracked into inquisitional extremism if people find the true mystical food inaccessible, as North America learned in the Reagan years. I understand Harding's book has caused quite a stir in Britain: perhaps it will persuade some more folk of goodwill to stand up and make a fuss about the monstrous wrong still being done to Rushdie.

But allowing that Harding does use the blasphemy trail mainly as a literary device, I also think that it's much more than just a rehashing of his intellectual answers to his objectors; indeed, he says as much himself. At a deeper level it's the inside story of his *own* trial — a dramatisation of his own struggle over the years to hang on to the mystical identity he discovered in the 'living NDE' of religious tyranny in the home of his youth. The prosecuting counsel and the 27 witnesses he brings against John Noakes at the New Bailey of 2003 personify different facets of society's massive conditioning to separate selfhood, with which Harding had to come to terms if his mystical identity was to be lived out in the big world beyond his narrow home. And maybe readers who just fail to click into their own mystical identity by doing Harding's ingenious *koan*-like exercises, might try an alternative tack by doing what he's done in this book — actually personifying, psychodrama-fashion, the doubts that arise for them when they find Harding's ordinary arguments ingenious but not really convincing at gut level. The only time I ever had a brief breakthrough into mystical identity before my NDE was when I was doing a gestalt therapy-style dialogue between two conflicting parts of myself, and really let both sides have their full say instead of seeking a practical solution. Have a go with your own personal difficulties about mystical identity — and if anything happens, let me (and Douglas) know!

Even if this works, however, chances are that for you, as for me and Douglas, your inner dialogues will still remain largely private affairs. The genius of Shakespeare was that he could turn his into full-blown plays for the stage which could 'do things' at every level of the psyche for folks of all classes in the England of his day, and even produce work 'not of an age, but for all time', suitable for screen as well as stage. Ted Hughes (whose poet-wife Sylvia Plath was destroyed by just such an existential conflict within herself) has worked for many years with leading British producer Peter Brook (who screened both the life of Gurdjieff and the *Mahabharata*. Hughes succeeds in really getting inside Shakespeare, and has at long last published his insights in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. By sheer hard work he's gone beyond the traditional divide between the sentimentalists who quote Shakespeare as a mystic and the realists who emphasise his down-to-earth sceptical humanism. He does this by

grasping that without down-to-earth realistic humanism: sex, blood, guts and all, even the most beautiful mystic intuitions remain 'airy nothings'.

I can't begin to do justice here to this magnificent book — the only way to do it justice is to read it. Suffice to say that Hughes shows how all Shakespeare's later plays wrestle with the conflict between 'masculine' puritan aspiration to transcend nature and 'feminine' intuition of nature's fullness — a conflict in which neither side is 'right' or 'wrong', yet where no mere compromise or synthesis is possible short of the eternity-experience itself, 'the dark backward and abysm of time', which must then be able to contain every jagged element in both sides. If you want to understand the erotic roots of religious intolerance or environmental destruction, if you want to probe the depths of what happens when the greatest poetic genius of all time confronts the marvels and horrors of Complete Being, or if you just want a thundering good read to keep you going for a long time, this is your book. I wish the publishers hadn't abandoned to the Too Hard Basket the idea of an index. T.S. Eliot, once a director of Fabers (who were also Harding's first publisher) will surely be fuming in his grave at that omission! But the book is a marvel.

Ram Dass, in his 1988 foreword to Harding's *Little Book of Life and Death*, wrote that, 'after this gift, the literature on dying will never be the same again'. I'd say that after Ted Hughes' gift, neither Shakespearean criticism nor even the plays themselves will ever be the same again, even though there's much in the book I disagree with (and one of these days I'd like to write a book called *Shakespeare the Buddha* to say why). Hopefully, neither of these authors has yet given us his last gift, but meanwhile, don't miss out on what they've given now.

Further Reading

Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Faber & Faber, 1992

Douglas Harding, *The Trial of the Man who Said He was God*, Arkana, 1993