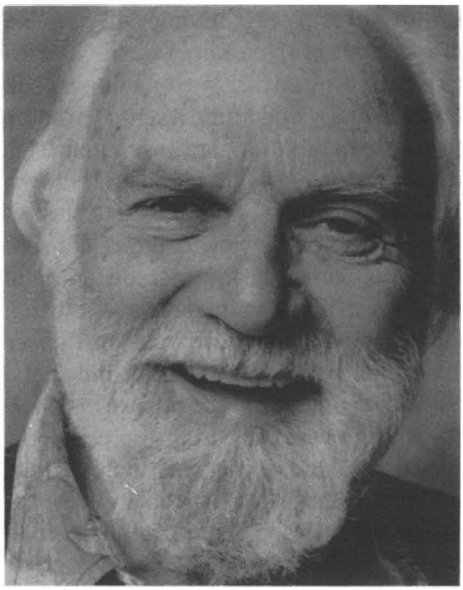

Douglas Harding and the Living Universe

Richard Lang

In the July 1997 issue of *Self & Society* John Wren-Lewis, in 'Beyond the Light — The Ultimate Identity Crisis', discussed a recent book by Douglas Harding. I was delighted once again to read Wren-Lewis on Harding; I have read several other excellent articles by him on the same author and enjoy the depth of his insight into Harding's work. Harding, born in 1909, has written many books and is increasingly well known as a practical spiritual teacher and philosopher. At the heart of all his work is the question 'Who am I?' However, Wren-Lewis's description of how Harding came to 'grasp his true mystical identity' is not quite right, and as a long-time friend of Harding I would like to present a more detailed picture. I will follow this with reflections of my own on Harding's work.

As Wren-Lewis says, Harding was brought up within the confines of the Exclusive Plymouth Brethren, in Lowestoft, Suffolk. Harding's description of growing up in this fundamentalist Christian sect can be found at the end of his book *The Trial of the Man Who Said He Was God*, discussed in Wren-Lewis's article. At 21 Harding left the Brethren, causing a stir with an essay which challenged their claim to be sole owners of Truth. His father, a genuinely spiritual man, pleaded with him to stay but failed to influence his determined son.

At this time — it was 1930 — Harding was working as an architect in London. Reading in his spare time, he started to develop a philosophy of his own. He was curious about his identity. Who was he? Philosophy was coming under the influence of Einstein's ideas on relativity. Harding began to realise that his identity in the world was dependent in part upon the range of the observer — it was relative

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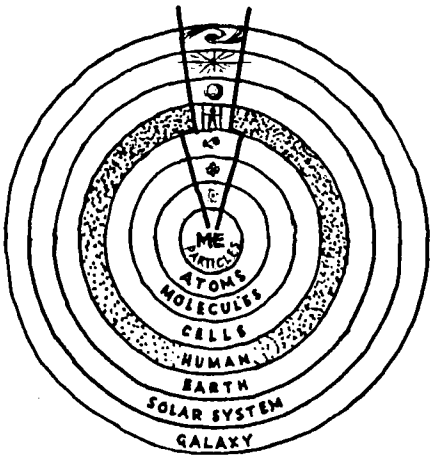
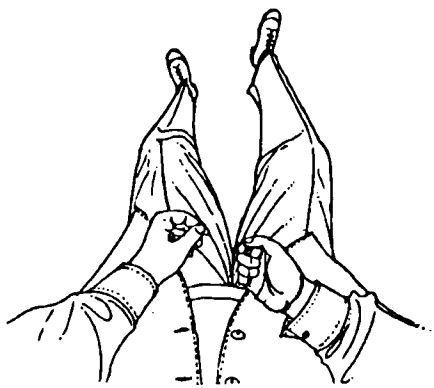
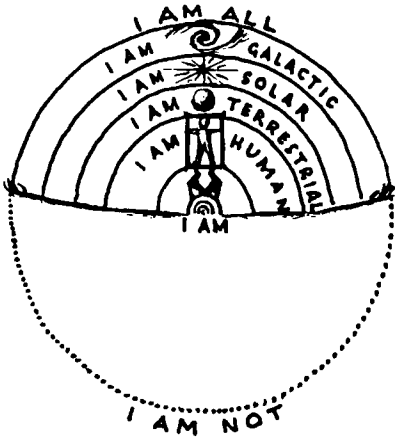


to where he was viewed from. From a few feet he was clearly human, but at closer range he was a community of cells. Working in the City of London he was also aware of being part of a larger organism or body: the city. He realised he did not stop at the boundary of his skin. The city, though conventionally assumed to be external, was as much a part of himself as his body or his cells. He could no more exist without his environment than without his organs, or without the cells of those organs.

By the late 1930s Harding was practising architecture in India — the Depression had made work hard to find in England. When war broke out he was commissioned into the army as an engineer. This only served to intensify his quest, for with the Japanese advancing through Burma his life was threatened. He wanted to know who he was before he died.

By 1942 (he was 33) Harding had mapped out in rough the layers of his identity in the world: cells at close range, molecules even closer, a man at several feet, humanity further away, a planet beyond that, and so on. But what was the centre and source of this onion-like system of appearances? It certainly wasn't himself as a man. One day he was reading a book on philosophy and found a self-portrait by the German philosopher Ernst Mach. This wasn't a conventional self-portrait drawn from a mirror, a view of oneself at several feet. It was Mach's view of himself at zero distance, from the first person point of view. Mach's legs pointed towards the top; further down were his hands with paper and pencil; below this his chest, and all the way down one side of the picture his nose, stretching practically from the ceiling to the floor. This drawing was the clue that awakened Harding to his identity at centre — the penny dropped (and, he says, is still dropping!). Like Mach, when he looked out into the nearer regions of his world what he saw was his body, and beyond that the surrounding scene. But what grabbed his attention was the absence in the picture of Mach's head, or of his own head as he looked at himself. One look nearer than his 'nose-blur' was nothing — no head at centre, no colour, no shape or movement, no materiality, no soul, nothing at all. Yet this nothingness was self-evidently aware, aware of itself as nothing, and aware of





what it contained: his body, his thoughts and feelings, his world.

Harding knew he had struck gold. The following weeks and months were spent in feverish activity, writing down a deluge of ideas and diagrams. He was up half the night, determined to record everything that poured through him. This simple insight, this direct seeing into his essential identity, suddenly made sense of so much he had been reading and thinking about. Soon he realised that if he was to present this insight seriously to the world he needed to know much more science; more history, more psychology, more philosophy, more literature. He needed to educate himself. Back in England after the war he took a year off architecture to study, to put his ideas together in a book. Well, one year turned into two which turned into five and more! He worked fourteen hours a day with no holidays. When finally he had finished he sent the manuscript to C.S. Lewis. Lewis replied in ecstatic tones: 'Hang it all, you've made me drunk, roaring drunk as I haven't been on a book (I mean a book of doctrine; imaginative works are another matter) since I first read Bergson during World War I. Who or what are you? How have I lived forty years without having heard of you before? . . . my sensation is that you have written a book of the highest genius.' *The Hierarchy of Heaven and Earth* was published by Faber in 1952. I personally believe it is set to become one of the major works of philosophy of the 20th century, though it is as yet little known. The published version is only a précis of the original manuscript, which is 800 huge pages with diagrams and quotations and references down the margin of every page. It is truly an *opus magnum*.

But Harding did not stop here. A few years later his classic little book *On Having No Head* put into easily readable form the experience and meaning of 'headlessness'. Harding describes in this book the moment when he discovered who he really was. He writes that he was walking in the Himalayas. But if you talk with him he will say yes, he did see this when he was out walking there, and he enjoyed his true nature being filled by those majestic mountains, but that it wasn't really the first time — except that *every* time one sees into one's true nature it's the first time! It was a popular way of sharing his insight.

Since the 1960s Harding and his friends have invented and developed 'experiments' which awaken people to their true nature. And as well as continuing to write, he also, at the age of 88, travels the world giving workshops.

As Wren-Lewis points out, the Exclusive Plymouth Brethren have had a profound effect on Harding's life. In a sense he has not strayed at all from the roots of his childhood faith. Perhaps he is as fundamentalist as his father. He turned his attention round and awoke to the ground of his being. This ground is, strictly speak-

ing, indescribable, yet it is wholly accessible and self-validating, needing no outside mediation or confirmation. Harding argues that access to and knowledge of 'being' is not the property of any one religion or priesthood. It is everybody's birthright, the one thing that every one of us really is the authority on. In this sense he has grown beyond the Brethren.

Harding's life and work have married science and religion. Clearly he was — and is — a deeply religious and spiritual man. It is in his genes, in his family. Christianity made a profound impression on him as a young man. Yet his quest has also been scientific. His primary guiding light has been the evidence of the senses, not inherited belief. Modern science emerged towards the end of the Middle Ages in part as a reaction to the speculative thinking of the Schoolmen. These thinkers once debated how many angels could fit on the end of a pin! They didn't trust their senses enough to *look* — scripture was their authority. It took Galileo and other scientists to challenge Church dogma by conducting experiments. If you want to know whether a large stone falls at a different rate from a small one, drop both off the Tower of Pisa at the same time and watch! This is the spirit of modern science in action: trusting your senses. Don't just speculate, experiment. Don't just think, look. In its search for knowledge science observes things, peeling away layer upon layer as it looks ever closer, re-assembling those layers as it retreats to more distant viewpoints.

Harding joined this sense-based, scientific quest to know the world. But he did something extra — he included looking directly at that bit of the world that was himself. This was not lateral thinking but vertical looking. He turned the arrow of his attention round 180°, from observing things and their relationships 'out there' at a distance, to observing himself at zero distance. Applying the spirit and method of science to himself at centre he found he was empty of all things, void of matter, void of mind. For others he represented a many-layered system of appearances surrounding a central mystery, but for himself he *was* that mystery, that invisible root from which the universe grows.

Thus Harding discovered a very different universe from our commonsense version. The latter, influenced by Newton's description of objects acting on other objects, has little or no room for consciousness or subjectivity. It is a centreless and largely dead cosmos with specks of consciousness here and there (actually undetectable when investigated). Harding now found himself observing the world as it really presented itself — arranged in onion-like layers around consciousness. Echoing Dante's pre-scientific mediaeval cosmos with its 'spheres', or the Elizabethan cosmos with its 'chain of being', the scientific universe that revealed itself to Harding was organised hierarchically — the further a layer was from the centre the higher its status. Looking down, he saw his (headless) body emerging from this central consciousness. Looking out, he saw people, houses, the rest of the human scene. Looking up, he saw planetary, solar and galactic bodies. And though the idea of a centre implied a point, inspection revealed this central consciousness to be everywhere, flooding every level of the universe with life.

Many implications flow from this awakening. We generally believe our minds are somewhere in our heads, separated off from the world. But inspection in the manner Harding advocates reveals no central

container. Our thoughts and feelings, seen to be thus uncontained, fly back into and reclothe the universe. The universe positively welcomes them. One's mind is once again at large in the world, as it was in childhood, only now with the valuable ingredient of objective self-consciousness. There is a sigh of relief; for perhaps a fundamental problem with our minds is simply our attempt to bottle them up in imaginary headquarters. Really they belong in the world. By letting our minds return home — they are raring to go — we stop pretending we are separate from our world. This is healing on a broad, deep front.

Now this is only to dip into some of the discoveries and implications that naturally flow from such insight into the nature of self. Of course, different people will discover different things, but all these varied discoveries arise from the same fertile ground. Though the lamps are many, the light is one. This is the heart of the matter, the central bit; the bit that isn't a bit after all, but infinitely clever nothingness, the source of the living universe.

The next workshop with Douglas Harding will be held in London on May 30th, 1998. Contact: 0181 806 3710. Web site: http://www.headless.org

Spirals

Richard Lang

The yellow daffodils and the child
sing wonderful songs together.
And as the daffodils make way
for their cousin, the red rose,
the child makes way for the woman.
Today I turned and saw a spider
race across its web and gobble a fly,
returning satisfied to its lair.
Life eats life, and so it goes.
Now summer seems to be back
this golden autumn day,
yet I know winter approaches.
I sweep up the leaves gathering in the garden
and plant snowdrops and daffodils.