

## **'Beyond the Brain VI - Memory Beyond the Brain'**

**Conference held by the Scientific and Medical Network in association  
with the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group**

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A phrase that seldom crops up in everyday conversation is 'Akashic record'. If, like me, you overhear those words while travelling on a mainline train out of London, you may well be, as I was, on your way to a Beyond the Brain conference in one of Britain's finest cathedral cities.

This year, the sixth conference in the series took place in Lincoln, and memory was its theme. With much to savour, perhaps the most memorable image of the conference was evoked by Professor Gary Schwartz of Tucson, Arizona. He described standing one evening at the window of his hotel room looking out over the lights of the city and bay of Vancouver towards the sky and the stars, and coming to a sudden appreciation, all the more vivid in that he was naked, that what he could see was only a tiny fraction of the total spectrum of radiation, of the myriad vibrating and persisting energetic 'feedback loops', in which he was bathed and to which he was contributing; and reflecting moreover that since these vibrations do not interfere with each other ('it is not a blur, it is not a mush'), and exist largely in the vacuum of space, such feedback loops represented a vast storage system necessarily retaining a potentially retrievable trace of all previous events, let alone future ones. Here then was a scientist describing a basis for the ancient concept the woman on the train was alluding to: the Akashic record, a cosmic memory where everything that has been, is now, and is to be is said to exist.

David Lorimer had opened the conference with a characteristically authoritative survey of the different interpretations, conceptions and attempted localisations of memory, along the way touching on most of the themes later speakers would develop. He noted the continuing inability of neuroscience to pin down explicitly where memory traces are to be found, giving continuing life to hypotheses that place them certainly beyond the brain, if not beyond the body. Many believe that it is memory that forms the sense of self; can it be that those memories continue after death as a soul?

Then followed the now traditional and helpful speakers' introductions, from which we learnt to recognise who were to be our guides on our two day tour through some of the mysteries David had laid before us.

We began our journey appropriately enough within the brain or at least the body. Professor John Gruzelier of Imperial College shared with us the remarkable results of using biofeedback techniques to promote theta rhythms and thereby induce a hypnogogic state: that borderland between waking and sleeping in which emerges not just creativity but also enhancement of mood. If we add exercises to develop heart beat coherence, then we have a potent recipe for success and well-being: student musicians improved their

performance by as much as two honours grades; dance teams displayed greater technical virtuosity and joyfulness. All this in a setting not of stress and anxiety but of love, empathy and, in the case of meditators, bliss. John set out some of the meticulous research that has given biofeedback a new impetus and linked these findings to our theme by emphasising how creativity involves reorganising and recombining memories in new, often symbolic, ways, noting a possible link with the greater distance travelled within the brain by slow theta waves than faster alpha.

Dr Iain McGilchrist's remarkable career as a Fellow of All Souls, who having become disenchanted with literary criticism turned Consultant Psychiatrist and neuroscientist, qualified him admirably to guide us into the thickets of literature, memory and the brain. Memory, he pointed out, is not stored in discrete elements but rather is embodied, a point developed by other speakers. With barely a mention of Proust, he drew out the significance of 'context memory', mediated through the right cortex, and 'public memory', centred in the left. Quoting extensively, especially from Wordsworth and *The Prelude*, he stressed the 'betweenness' that characterises so much post-Renaissance romantic literature, shot through as it is with nostalgia, melancholy, and a bitter sweet sense of loss and possible renewal.

Roz Carroll, a body psychotherapist with a deep interest in neuroscience, was introduced by Andrew Powell, Founding Chair of the Royal College of Psychiatrists Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group, associated with the Network in setting up the Conference. Roz' journey took us right into the community that makes up the body: its skeleton, muscles and organs. From infancy on, all these build their own memory, from which indeed our awareness of self is constantly reconstructed. She drew attention to our senses, both the five outer and the still often neglected inner such as proprioception, interoception, balance, and what she called 'fluids' or 'wetbrain': water, blood, interstitial fluid, hormones, enzymes; and significantly including those colouring agents of emotion, the neuropeptides, so vividly described by Candace Pert in *Molecules of Emotion*. These inner senses are largely mediated by resonance and vibration. She involved the audience in an exploration of their own bodies, and highlighted the growing significance and sophistication of John Bowlby's attachment theory for understanding child and adult development. Particularly interesting was the idea that the right brain, so crucial for healthy relationships in childhood and beyond, receives directly neuronal input from the inner bodily senses, while the left brain lacks such connection and acts rather 'as interpreter and inhibitor in the best and the worse senses', as Roz put it.

Gary Schwartz' epiphany in the Vancouver hotel was not the culmination of his first presentation. He used that event as a stepping stone in his efforts to establish to his own, and I fancy most of his audience's, satisfaction that the presence in living organisms of persistent dynamic feedback loops implies that cells have memory. In turn, this leads to the *prediction* that transplanted tissue would bring donor memories with it to the recipient. And that is what is found: a woman transplanted with the heart of a motorcyclist develops a previously entirely uncharacteristic taste for beer and chicken McNuggets; a man 'falls in love with classical music' when he receives a transplant from a black classical violinist, contrasting with his

prejudiced fear that he would find himself taken by an enthusiasm for rap. The many and continuing confirmed cases of this sort are soon forgotten, for they contain, as Gary put it, 'terrifying implications' for our culture's consensus view of the world. Gary stressed that feedback loops of the kind he described occur at all levels of complexity, between cells, between organs, between people, even between galaxies. This implies relationship, which in turn implies evolution and both are based in love.

That evening we enjoyed a video interview with Rupert Sheldrake, expertly conducted by Peter Fenwick. Rupert's morphogenetic fields appear to play a similar role to Gary's dynamic feedback loops, but on the face of it are not mutually compatible. A live debate between these two would be rewarding.

In his second presentation, Gary Schwartz described the Afterlife Experiments, in which the team he leads is investigating and generating mediumistic evidence for the survival of consciousness, using rigorous controls and the full panoply of scientific method. He noted, following William James, that the methods of neuroscience cannot distinguish between the hypotheses that the brain *generates* consciousness and that it *transmits* it. To use a contemporary analogy, correlations and the results of ablation and stimulation notwithstanding, we remain essentially outside the television set, unable to tell whether the programme content arises within or without it. He gave a number of intriguing examples of veridical communication by apparent afterlife consciousnesses, but it is the outcome of the meticulous research now underway that will have real impact. Like a number of presenters at the conference he did not shy away from speaking of love, used here as an acronym for listen, observe, value and empower.

In 2001, cardiac physician Dr Pim van Lommel published in *The Lancet* the results of a large scale long-term well designed prospective study of near death experiences. The striking findings of his team underlined how common and consistent in content are NDEs. In his clear and thoughtful presentation he built on the extensive data now available to speculate, rather as Gary had done, that it may be that the brain in transmitting consciousness also filters it so that we are not overwhelmed. Not for the first time at the conference I was reminded of Ravi Ravindra's response to this puzzle. 'Maybe it is not consciousness that is within the brain, it is the brain that is within consciousness'. Pim went on to discuss possible physical interpretations of his findings, including using the possibility that consciousness arises in one aspect of 'phase space'.

These conferences provide much more than seats in a lecture theatre. Lincoln cathedral was memorably large and beautiful, and atop a surprisingly steep hill. Worth the climb though, for Evensong and for an excellent organ recital given especially for us, now a Beyond the Brain tradition.

The food and accommodation recalled for many of us the relatively Spartan conditions of our own university life, while the conference hall itself and the atrium where we took our meals were congenial and friendly places, in spite of their size, a feature which added significantly to the warm and friendly ambience that we enjoyed.

As always, some delegates found tension between their desire to sit, so to say, at the feet of distinguished and informed speakers, and their impulse towards personal expression and participation. This time we had two sessions in groups of 10 to 12, where confidential discussion and sharing about the theme of the conference could take place. Further, on this occasion all the speakers kept more or less to the time allotted, thus allowing useful opportunity for questions and open discussion. Most of the people I spoke to seem satisfied with these arrangements and my impression was that this pattern achieved the most successful balance of those adopted to deal with this tension in the series of conferences. Overall, the organisation of the conference ran remarkably smoothly, a tribute to the professionalism and hard physical work of the administrative team.

A final reflection. Based as it is on increasingly patchy memory, scribbled notes, audio recordings and half remembered conversations, this report necessarily is full of omissions, biased, and influenced by the unconscious including its dark side. Yet the Akashic record, to which the woman on the train referred, is perfect and complete, like the life review in the NDE and Gary's cosmic field of reverberating feedback loops. Perhaps we should recall that the root Sanskrit word 'akasha' means space, sky, and that it was the sight of that sky and its stars that provoked the joyful yet terrifying growth in consciousness that Gary shared with us. It is growth rather than perfection that we should strive for, and this conference provided an opportunity for just that.

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