

**‘Beyond the Brain V’**  
**Healing, Prayer and Forgiveness: Frontiers of Applied  
Spirituality and Consciousness Research**  
**King’s School Canterbury August 21<sup>st</sup> - 24th 2003**

Hosted by the Scientific and Medical Network, The Spirituality and Psychiatry  
Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the  
Transpersonal Section of the British Psychological Society

Report by Dr. Julian Candy

The pace of change is quickening and intensifying. The first three of these impressive biennial conferences took place at St John's College Cambridge, the fourth at Ripon, and this year at King's School Canterbury, which lies largely within the precincts of the Cathedral, itself the spiritual heart of Anglican Christianity now under such pressure to change or die. Its Cathedral though has never ceased to experience change. It has been repaired and partially rebuilt numerous times over the centuries. It is surrounded by relics and ruins, old buildings and new, in a fascinating and to the unfamiliar confusing jumble of eras, of things discarded, things once new and now old, things very new. In spite of all, its essential beautiful, uplifting and awesome spiritual structure remains outwardly and inwardly unaltered.

As for our topic, so much has changed since 1995! At that time consciousness research was still for most scientists a relatively new and contentious topic. To couple it directly with applied spirituality would have been seen as presumptuous and foolish. Even to mention topics such as healing, prayer and forgiveness, other than in a strictly theological or devotional context, would have invited mockery, not always hidden. Now we are beginning to understand that these topics fit together naturally, from their nature, and that objective and subjective perspectives on them are complementary and not antagonistic. This excellent conference fostered and deepened this understanding, filled as it was both with ‘data’ and with shared experience.

**David Lorimer**, to whom so much of the credit must go for creating this Conference and its predecessors, commented in his introduction on the growing acceptability of terms such as spirituality, and the increasing interest in studies of forgiveness and of transformation, for example. He was bold enough to introduce the L word, placing it at one level in a loop with fear, though paradoxically (and profound truths generally introduce themselves as paradox) at a higher level love transcends fear.

We enjoyed a video interview with **Larry Dossey**, the American cardiac physician who has done so much to draw the scientific and lay communities attention not just to the effectiveness of prayer but also to the significance of spirituality in healing - which is not confined to ‘what wounds do’, as Larry and I were taught in medical school. Prayer brings results, in all sorts of contexts and settings, perhaps even retrospectively. In my view, we should not draw any particular conclusions from this about the nature of the divine, of God, since it does no more than to show that the cosmos is much more intimately interconnected than orthodox science and even theology would have us believe. The spiritual aspects of healthcare are now taught in most American medical

schools, a most remarkable and surprising development, for which indeed Larry must take some credit.

**Mitchell Krucoff** and **Suzanne Creter** gave us impressive data illuminated by reflections on its theoretical underpinnings and implications. Their MANTRA study is showing that noetic therapies such as music, imagery, healing touch, relaxation and prayer are helpful to patients about to undergo cardiac catheterisation. They pointed out that any effective treatment will have side-effects and contraindications, and therefore questions like 'is the effect of prayer dose related?' and 'should death be seen as a negative outcome?' need to be asked and indeed can be given answers.

**Peter Fenwick** put added flesh onto of the body of evidence that prayer is effective by providing fascinating detail, much of it in beautiful pictures, to illustrate brain and other correlates of such matters as forgiveness, meditation, lying, and the immune system's role in ensuring that people who go to church live longer.

**Janet Quinn** was another speaker who emphasised the welcome change over the last few years in attitudes towards spirituality and health. She talked movingly about the nature of true encounter between professional and patient and urged us to act in accordance with what we say we believed - to walk the talk. 'Healthcare is a spiritual practice.' She used poetry not just as illustration, but also to provide the very framework of her presentation.

We continued a tradition begun at Ripon by enjoying Evensong in the Cathedral followed by a short organ recital. In its way, the Cathedral provided for us a backdrop, a place of meditation and a reminder of the point of stillness within us. It loomed benignly over everything we did at the conference.

After dinner **Bart Van Der Lugt** touched us all with a profound exposition and meditation on the processes of birth and of dying. His work with the dying in hospices, and his primary profession as an obstetrician, spring from the same profound impulse: that of the midwife, the skilled assistant at the mystery of transformation. 'When the body dies a spirit is born...' His dignified demonstration of an act of humility was especially moving and instructive.

The next morning **Jeff Levin** used his particularly engaging and clear style to bring to life for us his pioneering studies in the epidemiology of faith and love. Building on his recognition over 20 years ago that largely unacknowledged research pointed to the health benefits of regular churchgoing, he has now assembled a body of data that overwhelmingly demonstrates the value of faith-based and spiritual attitudes to bodily and mental well-being. He is now researching the 'ways and powers of love', and the epidemiology of transcendence. We need to act on this knowledge: if a drug were as effective as a spiritually focused life it would sweep the market and make millions.

Early on during his research Jeff encountered an attitude not yet expired, and shared I believe to a degree by some at the conference. Is it acceptable to 'put God to the test' by subjecting prayer and spirituality to double blind controlled trials and the like? Do we really see prayer as a form of bureaucratic transaction? Would I choose to worship a God who can be pinned down in this way? While the potential fund-giver who Jeff encountered set the matter in the context of blasphemy, we might see the problem as centred on a detached orthodox third person attitude towards something that supremely cannot be captured using such methods. Yet I believe such methods have their place, provided (and all our speakers would grant this proviso) that they are balanced by a personal recognition that ultimately all true knowledge is obtained only by experience (and some might add that ultimately all experience is experience of the divine).

Our next speaker moved us firmly in the direction of the experiential. **Andrew Powell** spoke about love, a word used in so many different ways and the source of so

many misunderstandings. First he took a developmental approach, then he guided us through the chakras. He emphasised our overriding need for relationship: 'no one ever says on their deathbed 'I wish I'd spend more time at the office.'" He noted that following a near-death experience people become transformed, transformed by profound love. Sadly so many of us never develop a fully mature capacity to love and be loved, an inhibition which leads to the 'near life experience' whose close companion is the fear of death.

**David Fontana** presented an elegant review, partly historical, partly contemporary, of the relationship between psychology, religion and spirituality. He identified the apparent duality between science and religion, commenting that experiment is not confined to the other, since one can experiment upon oneself. He noted the view that belief in an afterlife is an essential component of spirituality, and rehearsed some of the characteristics of mystical experience.

The late-night movie comprised a striking video featuring an interview with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, playful yet profound, and full of wisdom so hard-won through experience of persecution redeemed by a loving response. A personal message from him to the conference was read out.

**Alexandra Asseily** is a most persistent and creative person. A few years ago, after living as a diplomat's wife in Lebanon, she had a transforming 'beyond the brain' experience. She felt inspired and impelled to provide a physical manifestation of her realisation that the 'contract' between the generations which holds families and communities locked in conflict can only be broken through focused compassion and forgiveness. After much mental and practical struggle, she was guided to initiate and create a Garden of Forgiveness in Beirut. It links within its four-acre site in that war damaged city three cathedrals and three mosques, and is itself built over an ancient temple. We were shown pictures to illustrate its growth and its impact.

The last speaker at the conference was **Canon Beaumont Stevenson**. His witty talk was built on the recognition that since spirituality is transpersonal, group dynamics are relevant to understanding it. He gave many examples from his own practice as a priest and a group analyst of the paradoxes and multilevel interactions with which we tangle as we struggled to pass from the 'I' to the 'we'. God, we might say, is a group. He emphasised the power and wisdom of a group to teach and enhance the individual, who may be able to entrust to the group secrets he would not share with any other single person.

Inadequate summaries of the set piece presentations cannot give more than a taste of the experiences we encountered at Canterbury. Just as important as the lectures was the empathetic sharing both within the hall and outside it. Acquaintance ripened into friendship, new friendships were made, old ones cultivated.

Inevitably some of us found ourselves comparing this event with the four previous Beyond the Brain conferences. I was struck that even more than on previous occasions both old hands and newcomers appreciated and enjoyed these three days together. As always, there were practical difficulties which even the best efforts of the excellent Conference administration could not entirely eliminate. Some of the accommodation was half a mile or so from the Conference hall, and in spite of a welcome leaven of younger delegates, many of us found the trek exacting. Such physical obstacles notwithstanding (could it be in part because of them?) almost every comment I heard expressed satisfaction at the Conference. People were glad they had come.

How should this be? My best guess is that the reason lies in the concordance of form and content, place and theme. Setting aside the corruption and deformity which beset any lasting organisation, so much of the profound and pervasive intention of the millions who have prayed and worshipped in Canterbury Cathedral has been focused on

healing and forgiveness. Certainly, the Cathedral knows all about change, even rapid change - you see signs of that all around you. Yet it also knows that some truths endure and cannot change. High amongst those truths are those which proclaim that love heals and that prayer is a channel for forgiveness.

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