Where on Earth is Heaven?

Jonathan Stedall

Foreword by Richard Tarnas

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For Thomas and Ellie

Jonathan Stedall by Saied Dai, 2004

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Foreword

To read this book is like sitting by a fire on a long winter's evening, listening with delight to a friend of many years who has thought deeply about life's mysteries, and who is now looking back on his life's journey to share, modestly and without pretension, its accumulated wisdom. This is a deeply humane book, by a deeply humane man. But it is also more than that.

For in his unassuming way, Jonathan Stedall explores questions and realities, and intimations of realities, that take courage to speak of in an age long ruled by that confident mindset which still believes it has more or less fully and objectively revealed the true nature of the universe. In many ways this is an old-fashioned book—unhurried in its reminiscences and reflections, rather like an intimate essay, full of treasured quotations, courteous to the reader, and sympathetic to its subjects. Yet it is also a strangely new book, radical in its willingness to push the conventional boundaries of received knowledge about what is real. It engages the big questions of life and death, of immortality and love, drawing on sources of insight that have not been accommodated within the narrow empiricism and rationalism of the orthodox modern mind. Without fanfare, without vaulting ambition, Stedall quietly seeks to understand those many more things in heaven and earth than have been dreamt of in our modern philosophy.

Ours is a time between world views, when the powerful assumptions that have shaped the modern understanding of the world and of the human being are undergoing a radical change. It is a time that C.G. Jung called the *kairos*: the ancient Greek term for the 'right moment' for a changing of the fundamental symbols and principles. Jung saw this change as happening with a kind of evolutionary necessity, beyond our conscious choice. Yet he also viewed the outcome of this great shift as in some way depending on how well we consciously participated in its unfolding. At the heart of this shift is a transformation in the spiritual condition of the modern self, which has long been grappling with the paradox of being a purposeful, meaning-seeking oddity of consciousness in a randomly evolving material universe lacking in intrinsic meaning, purpose, or soul.

In the conventional scientific world picture, the spiritual dimension of being must ultimately be seen as nothing but an idiosyncratic projection of the human subject. To preserve consistently this world picture requires the metaphysical dismissal of most of what is most intimate and precious to the

human being. Yet to confront that contradiction is to take on an enormous existential task, a tension of opposites not easily resolved. That task, Jung recognized, and Stedall recognizes, defines the spiritual adventure of the modern self.

Jonathan Stedall takes on that adventure, and brings certain special gifts to the task: a calm integrity and warmth of spirit, a breadth of human empathy, an appreciation of the different stages of human life, of different kinds of human beings, of different perspectives, of the different cultures and religions of the world. Throughout this unique narrative of a life's seeking and learning is an engaging transparency, a self-deprecating modesty, that is linked to an extraordinary moral and metaphysical imagination.

It could also be said that this book was made possible by the unusually enlightened working environment of the BBC in an earlier age. There, an intelligent creative producer like Stedall could follow his own intellectual and spiritual curiosity, propose a topic he found of real interest, and in all likelihood be given the green light to make a program or even a series. In such propitious circumstances, Stedall became well-travelled in both the world of people and places and the world of spirit and ideas. This book is the fruit of those explorations. He draws here on the great influences who have shaped his vision of life—Steiner, Jung, Teilhard de Chardin, Gandhi and Tolstoy, Emerson and Wordsworth, Eckhart and Plato. He describes the many remarkable men and women he has met in his life's journey and distills for us their insights – Fritz Schumacher, John Betjeman, Laurens van der Post, Cecil Collins, Malcolm Muggeridge, Bernard Lovell, Theodore Roszak, the men and women of the Camphill movement. He gently but firmly takes on the inevitable antagonists, such as Richard Dawkins. He shares his observations and intuitions without dogmatism, without inflation. Above all, he draws on his own profound experience of being human, a thoughtful person fully engaged in contemporary culture, in a life of wide horizons and poignant losses. This is a gift made possible by a lifetime of reflections and discoveries, tendered with the lightness of spirit of a good friend sharing a very interesting story indeed.

Richard Tarnas

Preface

> What is essential is invisible to the eye, the little prince repeated,
> so that he would be sure to remember.
>
> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

My title *Where on Earth is Heaven?* is a question that my son Thomas asked nearly twenty years ago, when he was seven years old. It's a good and reasonable question whatever age you happen to be. He went on to become a physicist and is, I believe, asking it still – albeit using different words and concepts. This book is an attempt to address that question, for what lies behind those words has long interested me.

I'm sure that I didn't ignore or evade my son's curiosity all those years ago, but now I would like to share with him and his equally inquiring sister, Ellie, some thoughts I have had in the meantime; thoughts, too, about immortality. It is a decision partly prompted by the growing awareness that I won't be around forever, at least not in my present shape and form – an awareness heightened for me by a recent and potentially serious illness.

Thomas and Ellie 1989

All of us have had parents and most people become parents themselves. Such relationships can be a bond of extraordinary power, and the prospect of their severance is deeply disturbing. Yet despite this underlying fear, and the overwhelming sense of separation and loss that most people initially experience on the death of someone they love, I do believe that our relationships with one another, all relationships, survive as more than just memories. The story of how I came to this conviction is what I want to share not only with my son and daughter, but also with anyone else who might find this journey of mine of interest and perhaps of help.

Many people are content to say that we simply cannot know what lies beyond death, yet have faith there is more to life than meets the eye. Others dismiss the whole notion of a spiritual existence as fanciful and escapist. For me personally faith is not enough; I am more curious. I am also someone for whom the idea of a supersensible dimension to reality makes a great deal of sense. Yet I am very aware that however deep one's questions, the great mysteries of existence are not instantly forthcoming or easily accessible. I will only hear and understand what I am ready to understand.

I am also aware that the word 'survive' in relation to some sort of after-life may be misleading. People talk about life after death. What about life before birth? Or is there, perhaps, a timeless level of existence – neither past nor future – which itself is the source of what we call life? My physical body is certainly mortal, but this other aspect of my being – the very core of my existence – may not be bound by the laws of time and space. Are we, therefore, both mortal and immortal? The 19th-century American writer and lecturer Ralph Waldo Emerson called his body 'the office where I work'.

Nevertheless, death can seem very final. Eternity and infinity are words we've coined, but are concepts of which we have very little, if any, experience or understanding. Yet perhaps we already live in this eternal dimension of existence to a far greater extent than we experience consciously – above all in that third of our life we spend asleep – and where the notion of life and death may have a quite different meaning. If so, are heaven and earth perhaps not as separate as some people imagine? These are some of the questions that I have lived with for a long time and which I want to explore in the pages that follow.

Picasso once wrote to his friend Matisse: 'We must talk to each other as much as we can. When one of us dies, there will be some things that the

other will never be able to talk of with anyone else.' Perhaps Picasso needn't have worried, and after Matisse's death their dialogue did continue, and does so still.

For years I have kept a notebook in which I have written what for me have been helpful and inspiring quotations, along with various thoughts of my own. I make no apology that what follows will at times seem like an anthology. (The bibliography contains details of all books mentioned in the text.) I am an observer and a listener by nature, and my work has been about selecting and editing the words, deeds and images that have touched me, and then turning them into films. A recent entry in my notebook reads: 'Each time we fall asleep we awaken to eternity.' I have a strong feeling that at death we face a similar threshold, but on a far larger scale. And perhaps this will not come as such a surprise if, as I have already suggested, we expand into that reality every night when we fall sleep.

However, in describing what have been meaningful awakeners for me, I am well aware that what I have found helpful may not necessarily be so for someone else. I am also aware that history is littered with examples of people attempting to impose their views and beliefs on others, whether at the point of a sword, from the nib of a pen, or nowadays at the touch of a keyboard. Nor is what follows intended to be an autobiography, though at times it may appear so. It is the story of an inner rather than outer journey, though frequently the two have intertwined.

As a documentary film director for forty years, more than half of which were spent with the BBC, I have been fortunate to be able to pursue much of this quest of mine through my actual work; and it is this work which I shall be drawing on extensively, taking you into the African bush, to the hill temples of northern India, into the streets of San Francisco, to a Taiwanese funeral, by train to Arcadia and by bicycle into the lanes of Cornwall – and above all into the minds and imaginations of some distinguished observers of our human condition; for in making these films I have worked alongside an extraordinary range of interesting and thoughtful people including the poet and broadcaster John Betjeman, astronomer Bernard Lovell, writer and explorer Laurens van der Post, playwright Alan Bennett, cultural historian Theodore Roszak, novelist Alexander Solzenhitsyn, writer and broadcaster Malcolm Muggeridge, poet Ben Okri, philosopher Jacob Needleman, physicist Fritjof

Capra, politician Michael Portillo, economist E.F. Schumacher, broadcaster and writer Mark Tully, and artist Cecil Collins – all of whom cast their light on these pages.

And on this journey my life has also been enormously enriched by encounters with hundreds of other men, women and children whose names will almost certainly never find their way into the history books – a peasant farmer in the Indian state of Bihar, a Russian cameraman, an American Sikh, a night-nurse in Birmingham, a Romanian bishop, the inhabitants of a Quaker Home for the elderly in Bristol, and many of those classed as having special needs – people who, in my experience, often have as much to give and to teach the world as they need help and support from us. I have also been fortunate to make films about the lives of several outstanding individuals from the past including Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi and Carl Gustav Jung; and films, too, about the educational, curative and medical work inspired by the research and insights of Rudolf Steiner.

As a film-maker I have always seen myself as a bridge between the subjects that I have found interesting and a largely anonymous audience 'out there' who may happen to be watching television on a particular evening, at a particular time – some out of choice, some by chance. I suppose in the end what has guided me is trust – trust in life, and in what I have found meaningful while at the same time respecting what has meaning for others; and also trust that in their hearts everyone is a searcher like myself, with the same sort of questions, fears and hopes.

I approach the writing of this book in much the same spirit that I have made my films. In this case the rushes, the raw material, are some of the experiences and ideas that I have had in response to the questions I have asked of life along the way, and some of the thoughts that life has whispered back to me. The venture has been much helped and inspired by a quotation often attributed to Goethe, but in fact written by the Scottish mountaineer W.H. Murray: 'Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too … Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.'

This courage to simply take the plunge was once demonstrated to me by the theatre director and dear friend Ron Eyre. We had worked together in the 1970s on a BBC series called *The Long Search* that Ron wrote and presented, and in which we attempted to understand something about other people's beliefs and faith, and the age-old search for meaning. That task was challenging enough, but what followed some eight years later was in many ways more daunting. Our plan was to make a series of seven films exploring the seven phases of life as outlined in Jacques's famous speech 'All the world's a stage' in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. The canvas was huge. All the sixty or so million inhabitants of Great Britain were qualified to take part. How and where should we select participants, and what should we film for that all-important introductory sequence?

Sometime earlier Ron had told me the story of a summer holiday he had as a small boy with his parents at Scarborough. His father had been unsuccessfully trying to persuade and encourage his somewhat timid son to go into the sea. Apparently Ron's final response, confronted by all those waves, was 'I'll go in when it stops'. Thus Scarborough became the setting for our opening sequence to the series. This time it was a grown-up and courageous Ron Eyre standing on the beach at the edge of the sea with a film crew in tow. He briefly outlined the idea of *Seven Ages* and the enormity of our task. He then told the story of his childhood fear of the sea. But this time he took the plunge: he ran into the sea, and so began the series.

So I too will simply dive in. Above all I want to try and share my sense that our existence in some mysterious way transcends what we experience as time; and that the essence of this existence is a web of relationships. And for reasons which I hope will become clear as this story unfolds, I believe it is vital – both for those of us who are alive, as well as for those who are seemingly no longer present – that this communion is both acknowledged and fostered; indeed that we keep in touch. You can simply call it unfinished business. Another word that springs to mind is love – the love that Philip Larkin hints at in his poem 'An Arundel Tomb'. In Chichester Cathedral an Earl and his Countess are commemorated side by side in the hard formality of stone; but then the poet notices 'with a sharp tender shock' that they are holding hands. Is it, he wonders, a confirmation of what we hardly dare believe: 'What will survive of us is love.'

Tomb of Richard FitzAlan, tenth Earl of Arundel, and his wife Eleanor of Lancaster in Chichester Cathedral

CHAPTER 1

What I do is Me

'Where shall I begin?' the White Rabbit asked the King during the trial in *Alice in Wonderland*. 'Begin at the beginning', the King said gravely, 'and go on till you come to the end; then stop.' That's easier said than done if you are trying to trace an inner journey and a search, the roots of which seem to be buried beyond the reach of consciousness. When did I begin? I shall simply have to rely on memory and in doing so I'm going to begin my story not quite at the beginning, but with one particular encounter I had as a film-maker which raises some challenging questions about themes such as love, heaven and eternity.

In 1965, in the early days of BBC2, I made a film for a series called *World of a Child* about a ten-year-old girl, Anne-Marie, in the care of nuns at the Convent of the Good Shepherd in Edinburgh. All the children at the convent had been through disruptive and often traumatic experiences in their early years, and were too emotionally damaged to be adopted or fostered. Most of them, including Anne-Marie, had never formed a close bond with their mothers, and therefore found it very difficult to establish relationships, trust another person or even form friendships among themselves.

When I asked the nun in charge of the home, Sister Therese – the children called her Mother Therese – how they brought religion into the children's lives, she said to me 'I think religion with these children is one of the most difficult things to get across, because again it comes down to a question of love. Now if a child has not known love, and hasn't loved being loved, then they can't love. And if you can't love a human being, then you can't love God.'

Anne-Marie 1966

Sister Therese

The nuns were certainly doing their best to surround the children with as much love as possible, but the wounds were deep, and the protective shells that Anne-Marie and the others had created around themselves were hard to penetrate. Despite this, however, everyone seemed to enjoy the novelty and excitement of our visit, and it was hard to leave again. This can be one of the sad things about filming – making new and very real bonds with people, and then having to say goodbye.

Over twenty years later, for a series called *Second Sight*, the BBC in Bristol where I now worked suggested to several producers that we might retrace and update some stories from old programmes with which we'd been connected. One of the Edinburgh nuns with whom I had kept in touch, Maeve Segrave, helped me to track down Anne-Marie to a council flat in Roehampton, where she lived with her partner Steve and their three children. She was now thirty-three years old.

During the filming that followed Anne-Marie spoke to me a great deal about her early childhood, and about being sent to live with an old man whom she called Grandad, and his two sisters; but no memory of any parents. At one point she actually used the word 'hatred' when speaking of this mother she never knew. 'If it wasn't for her,' she said, 'I wouldn't have done the things I've done. I made a muck-up of my life from nineteen to twenty-five. My life was a mess.'

From a very early age Anne-Marie had truanted from school and was eventually taken into care. She was then sent to the convent where she lived from the age of nine to sixteen. She described to me her reason for truanting as simply wanting to get back home and to get to the bottom of things. 'I thought they didn't want me there and I wanted to know why. I thought they'd be talking about me when I got back home, so I'd find out why they didn't want me … I always thought they put you in school, not for your benefit, but just for their sake … When I was young I believed I wasn't wanted.'

The 'mess' she spoke of largely referred to the five other children she'd had by three different and apparently problematic men before she met Steve. The first three children, she told me, were taken into care in Ireland because of their father's violence. She'd been to see them quite recently, but was told

that they wouldn't be allowed to visit her until they were sixteen. The last of those first five children was taken away shortly after birth, again because of the father's history of violence. Her efforts to get this baby back were thwarted by bureaucracy and red tape. Social Services said she had to have a home before the child could be returned. The Council said she wasn't eligible to have a house without a child. Not surprisingly she took refuge in a drug and alcohol induced flight from reality.

Anne-Marie spoke well of the nuns, confirming my own impression at the time. When I asked her about religion she replied: 'I know for a fact there's somebody upstairs and he's looking down watching you. And when your day comes he'll either take you away or throw you away. That's basically religion for me.'

'At the moment life's good', she said to me a little later, as Steve and their three children played together in the background – in the sunshine – in their local park. I was therefore very distressed to learn the following year that Anne-Marie had left her family; and I have been unable to find out where she went. Those wounds from early childhood were clearly so deep that not even the love of her children and their father was going to convince her she was wanted.

Such stories can make talk of a spiritual dimension to existence seem somewhat abstract and even insensitive. Some people, it appears, are simply dealt rotten cards and they suffer accordingly. I only hope and pray that Anne-Marie, wherever she is, is not wholly mired in that trough in which she found herself almost from day one. It's true that there are many examples of people overcoming incredible obstacles and hardship, but they are the very strong ones. What I do believe, though, is that achievement in life is ultimately nothing to do with whether you become Prime Minister, write successful plays, accumulate great wealth or even simply stay out of trouble. In any judgement about achievement, a person's starting point – and the degree to which they have edged forward from that – is what matters. Perhaps, also, we are constantly being challenged to have more faith in what Vernon Watkins, in his poem 'The Broken Sea', calls 'the truth that abides in tears'. This is easy to say, though, when it's someone else's tears and not your own.

Another example of the complexity of this word 'achievement' was brought home to me recently when an old friend of mine, Jim Hodgetts, died. He and I were floor managers together at ATV in the early sixties, but he then took himself off to Paris to become a film director on the crest of the Nouvelle Vague.

I was asked by several of his friends to write an obituary. At first I felt somewhat stymied, as Jim never did become a film director, and ended up living alone in rather reduced circumstances on the edge of Madras, India being a country where he had connections and the only place where he could finally afford to live. Most obituaries celebrate achievement, and quite

rightly so. But there is a particular achievement that is frequently overlooked. Most people don't become feature-film directors or famous in any other way. Yet most of us, like Jim, have to face, in varying degrees, the inevitable gap between our aspirations and what we actually achieve. And it was Jim's courage in doing just that, always with good humour and without a trace of bitterness or self-pity, which I then decided to celebrate in words and on behalf of the millions of others who do the same.

Although *The Guardian* publishes many obituaries of unknown or less well-known people, in a column entitled 'Other lives', I can understand why they never published mine of Jim – they have so many extraordinary and inspiring lives to acknowledge. But I hope that Jim was somehow aware of what I wrote. I ended with an affectionate description of an Englishman abroad, caring for a collection of stray cats, writing a book about his adopted city, craving marmite and marmalade, and going country dancing on Thursday evenings overlooking the Bay of Bengal. Long may he dance.

In the pages that follow I'm going to be writing about some pretty lofty ideas, as outlined in my preface, but throughout my life I have always tried to keep in mind the down-to-earth things that are happening every day – from the seeming humdrum to the downright tragic – in the lives and experiences of so-called ordinary people, myself included. That is why I have begun with Anne-Marie and Jim. Without bearing them and their stories in mind, much of what I explore in the pages that follow will be in constant danger of sounding like an intriguing but ultimately speculative abstraction, rather than a quest that is, I believe, highly relevant for all our lives.

In relation to this dual interest of mine, the heavenly and the earthly, the subject of biography is one that has absorbed me increasingly. I believe it offers a window into the deeper questions I am asking. When contemplating the pattern and signature of a human life as it unfolds – one's own or that of another person – how do we identify the starting point and the origin of its momentum?

A three-year-old boy I know asked his father recently 'Did you buy me?' When told that he wasn't bought, Tom then came up with another gem. 'I know how I started. I grew.' Charles Darwin couldn't have put it better. But neither Darwin nor Tom knew what he grew from. Darwin called his celebrated book *On the Origin of Species*, and not *On the Origin of Life*. Over two-and-a-half thousand years earlier the Greek philosopher Parmenides offered a clue of sorts when he said: 'Nothing comes out of nothing, and nothing becomes nothing.'

In his poem 'As kingfishers catch fire' Gerard Manley Hopkins celebrates the uniqueness of each creature, clearly implying that all of us have our own individual identity and tasks:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
… *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came*.

If this is so, what are the origins and where is the source of that uniqueness to which Parmenides likewise alludes? Emerson wrote: 'Man is a stream whose source is hidden.' How hidden is that source? How unique are we, once the conditioning and the masks are stripped away?

The debate about how and why we are as we are still tends to revolve around the over-simplified question of nature versus nurture. In one camp people believe that our genetic inheritance is the all-important influence. Others attach more significance to the particular environment in which we find ourselves, and to the psychological, physical and cultural influences that surround us as we grow up. In his famously gloomy poem 'This be the Verse', Philip Larkin warns against having children at all for the simple reason that 'Man hands on misery to man'. This is certainly true in the case of Anne-Marie. But it is equally clear that some very fine gifts can also be passed on, either genetically or through imitation and example. Yet is there, perhaps, still more to this crucial question?

Thomas Weihs, a Viennese doctor who eventually came to work in Scotland with children 'in need of special care', and with whom I made several films, used to say that children not only grow up but also grow down. In other words we already have an existence and a biography before birth; and our childhood is a time when this spiritual essence unites with the body we inherit from our parents. Genetics is therefore a very important factor, as is the environment in which we grow up and also down. But if there is any reality to this process which Dr Weihs and others have described – what I think of as the third ingredient, whether one calls it soul, spirit, or something else – then any explanations about why we are as we are need to be radically altered. Psychological insight into individual human behaviour assumes a whole new dimension if you are prepared to live with the possibility that we come into life not only trailing what William Wordsworth called 'clouds of glory', but also baggage of a less glorious nature; what in the East is called karma. Another English poet, John Bunyan, hints at such a reality in the opening paragraph of *Pilgrim's Progress*: 'I dreamed, and behold I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand and a great burden upon his back.' Perhaps the house to which Bunyan refers represents our 'divine origin'; while the great burden consists of the unresolved conflicts and failings accumulated on our journey through many lifetimes.

Another helpful though quite different insight into this notion of what I've called a third ingredient, in addition to inherited nature and environmental

nurture, is provided by James Hillman in his book *The Soul's Code*. 'We believe', he writes, 'we come empty into this world.' He then describes Plato's concept of a daimon, a sort of companion to the soul who accompanies us through life, reminding us of who we really are, why we came to earth, what tasks we have set ourselves and what we need to learn. 'Remember who you are' was a line in the film *The Lion King* that I scribbled into my notebook some years ago.

'Man's daimon is his destiny', wrote Heraclitus in the 5th century BC. The Romans referred to this companion as a person's 'genius'. In Christianity the daimon became known as a guardian angel. The stirrings of what we call our conscience could also be seen as our interaction with our daimon; but not the conscience that is nagging us to conform to parental and social habits. In other words stop worrying about what the neighbours think. I find the word 'authentic' helpful in this respect – a concept that has its roots in the Greek notion of being author of one's own deeds. 'What does our conscience tell us?' asked Nietzsche: 'You are to become the person you really are.'

For me one of the most perceptive insights into this whole question of conscience and remembering who you are came many years ago from my daughter, Ellie, when I told her about Jacques' speech in *As You Like It*:

> All the world's a stage
> And all the men and women merely players:
> They have their exits and their entrances;
> And one man in his time plays many parts,
> His acts being seven ages.

Ellie, who was ten at the time, responded by saying 'sometimes we forget our lines, and then we're horrid to people.'

Like most of us, I certainly didn't grow up automatically accepting all the thoughts and values expressed by those around me. I, too, had my inner voice. With parents divorcing when I was only eight there was plenty of conflict in the air; but strangely enough I have only magical memories of my early childhood, mostly associated with nature – a garden blessed with butterflies, our cherry orchard, and the surrounding woods and lanes, all still quiet and empty in those relatively innocent days for a child during and after World War II. Everywhere around me were the miracles we so easily take for granted – a caterpillar turning into a chrysalis and eventually becoming a butterfly, tadpoles growing into frogs, and tiny seeds producing radishes in my own little patch of garden. For a small boy these were miracles indeed.

I have vivid memories, too, of the beautiful house and garden of my grandparents – the fish in their pond, particular flowers that I loved, birds' nests that my sister and I discovered in the hedges, mushrooms we collected, haystacks we played on, and the sounds and scents of nature in spring and

autumn. All these experiences gave me such joy, the intensity of which I can still experience not only as a memory but whenever I now encounter a brimstone butterfly, a goldfish, a cowslip – or when I step outdoors in the early morning.

Author aged ten

I also had an imaginary friend whom I called Doyky. His existence feels so private and profound that I feel hesitant about mentioning him at all. In fact this is the first time I've ever written his name. In many ways my memory of Doyky is more vivid than of the human beings who surrounded me in my early childhood, yet his existence had and still has the quality of a dream. Nevertheless I knew exactly where he lived: in an overgrown copse beside the lane along which we went for walks. Doyky felt sacred – far more so than the church and Sunday School I attended. I suppose like many children I was, at heart, a pagan, and in many ways have remained so. Doyky was as magical as the nature that surrounded him.

Yet why do I remember so clearly these enchanted aspects of my childhood and not the trauma of being separated from my mother for much of three years while she recovered from tuberculosis, and then struggled to establish a new home for us? Is it simply temperament? If so, what is temperament? Perhaps, unlike Anne-Marie, I wasn't so deeply wounded because I knew that my sister and brother and I hadn't really been abandoned and were still loved – and loved each other. Children, I'm sure, sense very clearly the reality of a situation. They know the truth of things.

Nevertheless I imagine that some of those negative influences – even if not consciously remembered – have not disappeared entirely. Only to a certain extent can we pick and choose what sticks to us, depending, I suppose, on our own inherent character and sense of purpose. And perhaps my experiences in childhood were not mere chance, but willed by a wiser part of my being in order to learn what I needed to learn.

'Each of our souls', writes Hillman in elaborating on Platonic philosophy, 'is guided by a daimon to that particular body and place, these parents and circumstances, by Necessity – and none of us has an inkling of this because

it was eradicated on the plains of forgetting.' It's a beautiful phrase – 'on the plains of forgetting' – reminiscent of Wordsworth's line: 'Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.'

I have, in fact, become increasingly convinced that we need to forget, or rather are ill-equipped to remember, the underlying transcendental dimension of existence in order to develop new faculties and arrive at new insights through our own efforts. Forgetting is not just having a bad memory. It is, perhaps, a meaningful phase in our evolution.

For me a revealing example of this 'forgetting' was a powerful experience I had as a boy when I was given gas for a tooth extraction. I remember very well the moment leading up to the experience – moving away from the earth and out into space; and then came an illumination of great profundity, but it was a truth that I was unable to retain consciously. Yet I knew for certain that a revelation had occurred. Perhaps I have been nourished by it ever since, despite having no specific memory of it.

A different but equally profound insight into the mysterious process of forgetting is tucked away in the pages of that beautifully written book *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame. In the chapter entitled 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn', Mole and Ratty, rowing in their boat early one morning, have had an overwhelming experience of the god Pan:

> As they stared blankly, in dumb misery deepening as they slowly realised all they had seen and all they had lost, a capricious little breeze, dancing up from the surface of the water, tossed the aspens, shook the dewy roses, and blew lightly and caressingly in their faces, and with its soft touch came instant oblivion. For this is the last best gift that the kindly demigod is careful to bestow on those to whom he has revealed himself in their helping: the gift of forgetfulness. Lest the awful remembrance should remain and grow, and overshadow mirth and pleasure, and the great haunting memory should spoil all the after-lives of little animals helped out of difficulties, in order that they should be happy and light hearted as before.

This gift of forgetfulness is indeed precious, for it allows you to remember consciously only what you can make conscious use or sense of, and therefore what is helpful in the process of becoming 'the person you really are'. But to be truly 'happy and light hearted' as human beings we cannot just stay asleep. We do, I suspect, gradually have to wake up, and try to remember more.

What I call my 'awakeners' are a crucial element in the journey I want to describe – a quest to try and understand the relationship between what we call heaven and earth. These awakeners can appear throughout one's life and

are, I believe, intimately connected with the notion of a daimon and with the law of karma. One's early awakeners also seem to belong to what Thomas Weihs called our 'growing down'.

During the latter part of my childhood my mother became interested and involved in spiritualism. It was not a trivial interest, and the small gatherings in our home were conducted with the reverence and solemnity of a religious service. We three children were included, but there was no compulsion. It is significant, I feel, that none of us dismissed it as nonsense. After my intimate and inspiring experiences of nature, spiritualism became another great awakener and gave me, at an important stage of my development, a strong sense that there is more to life than meets the eye. It is an awareness that I have carried with me very strongly ever since.

The actual messages from what spiritualists call 'the other side' were, as I remember them, benign but lacking in any great profundity. The dead were alive and well, and seemingly living in a heavenly equivalent of a cosy town like Tunbridge Wells. Largely through something called a ouija board these communications gave no real insight into what a purely spiritual existence might be like. That, anyway, is my memory. For someone asking serious questions about the nature of reality, as I was gradually beginning to do, spiritualism became ever more unsatisfactory.

The best joke I've come across in relation to spiritualism, and indeed to the controversial subject of reincarnation – and I'm always on the lookout for jokes that help undermine our spiritual follies and pretensions – is told by Philip Toynbee in *Part of a Journey*, his wonderfully honest autobiography:

> Wife, in touch with dead husband through medium: 'Well, dear, what do you do over there?' 'Oh, we run about a bit; then we eat a bit; then we have a bit of sex; then we run about a bit again; have a bit more to eat, and a bit more sex … ' Wife: 'Goodness. I never knew heaven was like that.' Husband: 'Oh, I'm not in heaven. I'm a rabbit in Australia.'

Practices like spiritualism are, it seems to me, an example of our attempt to drag profound matters down to our level rather that developing our latent capacities for new forms of perception and experience. Physical proof of a purely spiritual dimension of existence is a contradiction in terms. In 'The Everlasting Gospel', the visionary poet and artist William Blake describes our challenge as seeing beyond physical things:

> This life's dim windows of the soul
> Distorts the heavens from pole to pole
> And leads you to believe a lie
> When you see with, not through, the eye.

This capacity or faculty that Blake points to requires much hard work. Our Home Circle, as it was called, was comforting – particularly for my mother and her two friends, all of whom knew people who had died, some tragically young – but it was in no way challenging, either morally or intellectually.

It is interesting to reflect that spiritualism arose during the 19th century, parallel to the early development of the telecommunications industry. By mid-century, sixty per cent of Americans claimed spiritualism as their religion. As the telegraph started to tap away, so too, it seems, did the spirits. In our gatherings, table-tapping was the other form of communication – one tap for A, two for B and so on. Given that somebody in New York could suddenly and miraculously speak to someone in London, it is perhaps not surprising that some people thought contact between the living and the dead a relatively straightforward possibility. It reminds me of the prophetic remark by that American free spirit, Henry Thoreau, who, when told it was now possible for someone in Texas to speak to someone in England, asked what would happen if they had nothing to say to each other!

Despite my reservations, however, I do think the whole phenomenon of spiritualism warrants more serious investigation and should not be dismissed because of the many instances of fraud. None of us in that little Buckinghamshire sitting room were fooling each other, making money or playing tricks, and that table certainly tipped and tapped without our assistance. If it wasn't the spirit of a Red Indian guide called Morning Star, or my grandmother assuring us that she was well and at peace, then who or what was it?

During his university years as a medical student in Basel, the pioneer psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung was amazed that the academic community refused to even acknowledge, let alone study, psychic phenomena with which he, as a young man from the countryside, was very familiar. Peasants had known about and accepted these occurrences for hundreds, if not thousands of years – not out of ignorance but from experience.

In the early years of the 20th century a number of eminent and open-minded people such as the psychologist William James, writer Conan Doyle and physicist Oliver Lodge did attempt a serious investigation of psychic phenomena. In our own time the biologist Rupert Sheldrake has also made a number of studies of telepathic communications between people, and between people and animals. Among other things, Sheldrake's work raises questions about where and what is this 'other side' that spiritualists speak about. Where are the boundaries, or are there potentially none at all?

Despite this seeming transparency, however, the general blandness of the messages we received in our Home Circle and at the local Spiritualist Church – a blandness that I have also observed more recently in tapes that I've watched of channelling, when so-called higher entities speak through people in a trance-like state – all prompt me to suspect that the origins of these communications

are often more human, or even sub-human, than celestial.

This conclusion leaves me asking why wiser souls, or even angelic beings, don't tap us out their wisdom across the threshold we call death? Or do they, but in much subtler ways, providing we are open enough to listen? We spend nearly a third of our lives asleep. Is that period really so blank and void as it seems to our conscious minds?

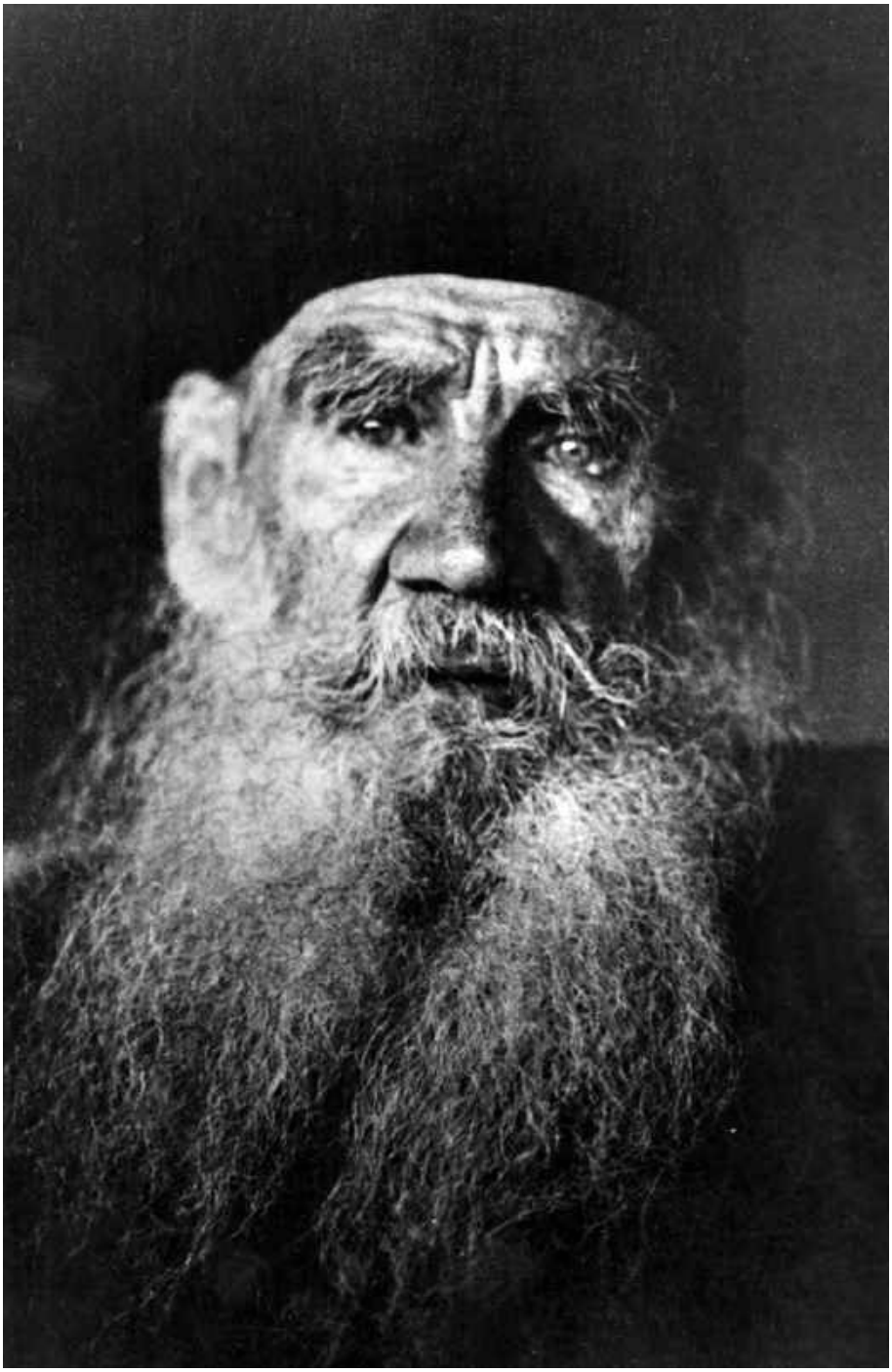
My early contact with spiritualism did prevent me from going ahead with what, at my Public School, was the almost automatic procedure of Confirmation around the age of fourteen. I liked and respected the Chaplain, Philip Bryant, very much, but he was unable to provide a rather naïve but sincere schoolboy with any satisfying link between the Christian dogma we were meant to absorb, on the one hand, and my experiences of spiritualism on the other. The so-called Divinity lessons were somewhat more interesting. A young and enthusiastic master, Raymond Venables, varied our studies of the Old and New Testaments with a book called *Moral Problems*. At that time it was a bold and radical initiative, particularly in a very traditional school like Harrow. I don't remember what the moral problems actually were, but I am sure I'm still wrestling with them. I also studied French literature under Venables. The questions he asked us to consider in all these lessons certainly stirred in me an interest in human relationships.

Another great awakener for me was something seemingly very different. I read a biography of Leo Tolstoy by an American called Ernest J. Simmons. Aged twenty, in an effort to better educate myself, I had asked my mother to bring me back *War and Peace* from the library. Somebody else had taken it out, but not the biography. One interesting aspect of such awakeners, whether it be a book, an encounter, music or a painting, is the experience you have of recognition, of familiarity. It is almost as though you know the place, the person, the insight already. In that sense I would describe it as a form of homecoming.

What touched me particularly on first reading this biography was Tolstoy's fascination as a child with something called 'The Green Stick'. His elder brother, Nikolai, had told him that a green stick was buried in the forest near their home and that on it was carved a secret which, when known to mankind, would bring about a Golden Age on earth. Then all human misery and evil would vanish, said Nikolai, 'and everyone under the wide dome of heaven would be happy and love one another.'

When he was an old man Tolstoy wrote in his *Recollections*:

> As I then believed that there was a little green stick whereon was written something that would destroy all evil in men and give them great blessings, so I now believe that such truth exists among people and will be revealed to them and will give them what it promises.



Leo Tolstoy in old age

At his own request Tolstoy was buried 'at the place of the green stick'. Some ten years after reading the biography I was filming that grave at his family estate, Yasnaya Polyana, deep in the Russian countryside, for a programme I made about Tolstoy's life.

Returning to Simmons' biography all these years later I can see why, as someone already starting to ask serious questions about life, I was so attracted to the book. Some of the chapter headings alone – 'My hero is truth', 'Spirit versus matter', 'Life is beyond space and time', 'To seek, always to seek' – were clear signposts for the journey I had embarked on in becoming a documentary film-maker.

Reading about Tolstoy's life also stimulated my own idealism and encouraged me to hold onto my youthful belief that the world itself could be a better and happier place. Like Tolstoy I have not lost faith in that dream. I also felt inspired to go on asking the questions stirring so strongly within me, not just questions about immortality, but about the nature and potential of human life on earth, and our problems in living up to that potential.

In one of his many moments of self-loathing Tolstoy wrote in his diary: 'I cannot get away from myself.' For me such a statement reveals a very profound insight of which we are barely conscious but which is echoed again and again in our daily speech. When I say, for example, that I am ashamed of myself, I am acknowledging that I am in fact two people.

It is an observation that seems to me clearly though paradoxically confirmed in the work of the behaviourist B.F. Skinner, whose book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* I read around this time. Skinner made a study of pigeon behaviour in particular, and his experiments with punishment and reward convinced him that human beings behave in much the same way: we are really no different from birds, rats, and the like. What he fails to acknowledge is that by making this observation he is actually transcending the very behaviour he has quite rightly recognised. We may indeed often behave like Skinner's pigeons in our daily lives, but as soon as we are capable of even a modicum of self-knowledge we are no longer merely a pigeon – even if we go on behaving as such, jumping through all sorts of absurd hoops for the sake of some juicy reward. Our recognition of the situation is a first step; to do something about it clearly involves a great many more.

In his book *The Divided Self*, the psychiatrist R.D. Laing suggests that insanity – in particular schizophrenia – is not a medical disease but the result of a person struggling with two separate identities: the one defined by family, culture and so on, and the other by the experience we all have of being uniquely ourselves.

'The poet takes the best out of his life and puts it into his writings', Tolstoy once declared, 'which is the reason his writing is beautiful and his life bad.' The best in each of us, be it only potential, resides perhaps in this capacity

for self-reflection. Like Tolstoy we are never quite at peace with the way we live our daily lives. We cannot seem to get away from ourselves, as Tolstoy experienced so powerfully; but we can undertake the long, slow struggle to transform that self – a task I can imagine taking many lifetimes – so that we are no longer in such conflict with our conscience.

Tolstoy lurched from crisis to crisis throughout his life. Aged thirty-nine he wrote to a friend: 'I have loved truth more than anything; I do not despair of finding it, and I am still searching and searching.' The riddle of existence haunted him; and the question that brought him to the verge of suicide some ten years later was, writes Simmons, 'the simplest of questions lying in the soul of every man: Why should I live, why wish for anything or do anything? In short, has life any meaning that the inevitable death awaiting one does not destroy?'

This, of course, is one of the key questions underlying this book. My early ponderings and dilemmas were enormously enriched by Tolstoy's lonely and courageous quest, and by the honesty with which he confronted the world around him and his own complex make-up. His moral dualism, suggests his biographer, was the conflict of all mankind: a struggle between conscience and appetites. As a young army cadet in the Caucasus Tolstoy wrote, ' … the voice of conscience is what distinguishes good from evil'. This conscience of his was to lead him into a lifetime of conflicts – with his wife, who could never share his extreme and at times utopian idealism; with the Orthodox Church, and with the whole apparatus of government; and finally with his own inherited wealth and privileged life.

Yet in his final dramatic act of protest at the age of eighty-two, when accompanied by his doctor he fled his home and family to live as a peasant, there is in this almost absurd and futile gesture a redemptive triumph. On October 28th 1910 he wrote in his diary, on the train journey that was to be his last, that he had no doubt he had done what he had to do: 'Perhaps I am mistaken and am merely justifying my actions. But it seems to me that I have saved myself – not Leo Nikolayevich, but something of which there is still a bit left in me.'

There is another extract from his diary, written a few years earlier, that stands out for me as powerfully as it did all those years ago, and that is profoundly relevant for all our journeys, inner and outer; for it gives very beautiful expression to the notion that what matters is our life in the here and now, whatever views we might have about eternity and life after death. 'No, this world is not a joke', he wrote, 'and not a vale of trials or a transition to a better, everlasting world, but this world here is one of the eternal worlds that is beautiful, joyous, which we can and must make more beautiful and more joyous for those living with us and for those who will live in it after us.'

Chapter 2

Quest and Questions

When I showed my brother David a first draft of this book he told me it conjured up for him the image of a sturdy old galleon returning from a very long and interesting journey around the world and laden with treasure – but with its hull encrusted with barnacles! The implication being that the book needed editing. Since then I have been scraping away, but it's not always easy to know what will be interesting for others – one person's barnacle may be another person's treasure.

My intention was to write very little about myself, but rather to describe the people and ideas that have helped me in my search for the answer to the question 'Where on Earth is Heaven?' Other people, however, on reading my first draft, asked for more about me. What was I feeling and thinking along the way? They wanted more of my reactions to those treasures in my hold. And so this deep interest of mine in biography that I have already declared will extend into moments from my own bumpy journey – the downs as well as the ups.

By the time I was twenty-one I was a few steps up the ladder to becoming a film-maker, working as an assistant film editor at Pinewood studios. I had already worked as a stage manager in a repertory theatre in Croydon, and then managed to get the all-important union card (which the film industry required in those days) by working in a film laboratory as a lowly technician. It wasn't an easy journey; there was no prescribed route to becoming a film director, nor is there still. At that laboratory in Soho Square in London I had to wear a white coat. At lunch time I would go out to buy my sandwiches still wearing my 'uniform'; and in those moments when I felt I was getting nowhere, I would pretend to myself that I was a medical student. At another low point I explored the possibility of going to live for a while on a Kibbutz in Israel. Then, that same summer, I responded to an advertisement for an overland trip to India, which at that time was a very bold and new type of adventure. In the end my determination to work with film kept me at home – a decision that paradoxically paved the way for the many journeys that lay ahead.

In those days it was still the cinema that attracted me, in particular the work of French directors such as Francois Truffaut, and the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman. I loved Bergman's masterpiece *Wild Strawberries*, in which an old man makes a journey across Sweden to receive an honorary degree, and on the way stops off at various places connected with his life. In some of these scenes he is a silent spectator as the events of long ago unfold once again before his eyes. Later I was to become interested in the idea that after death we relive our past life just like Bergman's old professor, only this time from the receiving end, as it were; according to some, we journey through the same events, the same encounters and relationships, but now experience each moment from the other person's point of view, and thus all the joy and all the pain we brought to others.

It was exciting to be at Pinewood, though the films being made there at the end of the fifties were nothing like the ones from Sweden, France and Italy that had so touched me. Apart from one other young assistant film editor, most of the people working at the studios didn't seem to share my particular interests. He and I were nicknamed Sight and Sound, after the highbrow film magazine produced by the British Film Institute.

Nevertheless, several important things happened to me during my time at Pinewood. The most difficult to convey, because it can easily sound somewhat crazy, was a dialogue I started to have with myself as I walked at lunchtime in the beautiful grounds surrounding the studios. Despite the fact that this dialogue was usually conducted out loud, I don't remember thinking that my lunch time ritual was in any way strange.

Looking back on that episode now I realise that it was probably deeply connected with this sense that each of us is, in fact, two people. I talked to myself. About what, I have no memory; but I know it was serious and that it revolved around the question of what my life was to be about, and the mystery of existence altogether.

During this time I had several conversations with one of the film editors, Gerry Hambling, about a Rudolf Steiner School his children were attending at Kings Langley in Hertfordshire. I don't remember having a particular interest in education in those days, but obviously something in me was sufficiently stirred for him to lend me a booklet by a man called Francis Edmunds outlining Rudolf Steiner's educational ideas. Later I realised that a few months previously someone had lent me a book of lectures by Steiner called *Theosophy of the Rosicrucians* which I only read much later on. Clearly, the work of this Austrian educationalist and philosopher (1861–1925), who once described his life's work as awakening the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe, was knocking at my door.

In the introduction to his booklet, Francis Edmunds writes of Steiner as 'someone making a direct appeal for a greater effort of consciousness in

contemplating the world'. Although thoroughly grounded in the science of his time, that 'world' for Steiner was not just all the solid bits, along with the sounds and smells we experience through our five senses, but also what he referred to as invisible and dynamic realities that permeate our surroundings and indeed each one of us. This insight and experience was one he shared with other esotericists of the 19th and 20th centuries, such as Madame Blavatsky and some of the theosophists who came in her wake, as well as her fellow Russian, P.D. Ouspensky. This other layer of existence is not, as I understand it, somewhere else – Ouspensky called it the Fourth Dimension. Steiner frequently uses the expression *geistige Welt*, translated as 'spiritual world', which for me is somewhat unhelpful since it tends to imply, in English at least, not only some other location but also somewhere essentially holy, in the religious sense. In the pages that follow I shall be writing as much about *this* world as I do about the so-called spiritual world because I have come to believe that in essence they are one.

In fact the German word *Geist*, as well as meaning 'spirit', can also be translated as 'mind'. In English we come closer to this definition in phrases like 'I shall be with you in spirit'. We also speak about entering into the spirit of things, and about the spirit of the law; for however sceptical many of us might have become about religion in all its manifestations, our sense of the transcendent is far from dead, and our everyday language reveals this constantly. We talk, too, about the spirit of the age – even the *Zeitgeist* – or the spirit of a place, without thinking twice. Neither thought implies something strange or surreal. Rather, it seems, these phrases embody our instinctive but subconscious recognition that life is indeed many-layered.

For Jung the word 'numinous' was helpful in this debate, for it was free of the clutter associated with religion, yet for him conveyed 'the feeling that one is encountering a dimension which is sacred, holy and radically different from everyday life, and which belongs to a superior order of reality.' The Indian sage, Sri Aurobindo, once said: 'If you are embarrassed by the word "spirit", think of spirit as the subtlest form of matter. But, if you are embarrassed by the word "matter", you can think of matter as the densest form of spirit.' In other words matter and spirit are essentially interwoven, which may offer a clue to understanding what we experience as consciousness; and it is the mystery of consciousness that I shall be exploring as I approach, from many different angles, this question of the meaning and whereabouts of heaven.

One of the most interesting books that I subsequently read on this whole subject is *The Secret History of Consciousness* by Gary Lachman. In it he points out that, over the last four centuries, science has increasingly tried to account for everything – including more recently our own inner worlds – in terms of atoms and molecules and the physical laws they obey. Another approach, which interested not only pioneers like Steiner, but also more

mainstream figures such as the French philosopher Henri Bergson, the psychologist William James and the Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser, is to invert the relationship and see consciousness not as the result of neurons and molecules, but as responsible for them.

Lachman writes in great detail and from various perspectives about the notion of 'cosmic consciousness', a phrase that first appeared in 1901 as the title of a book by an American doctor called Richard Maurice Bucke, a close friend and disciple of the poet Walt Whitman. The phrase was prompted by a sudden and overwhelming experience late one evening during a visit to London – 'an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe'. Bucke wrote his account in the third person:

> All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around, as it were, by a flame-coloured cloud. For an instant he thought of fire – some sudden conflagration in the great city. The next instant he knew that the light was within himself … he saw and knew that the cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal …

Such spontaneous illuminations are increasingly experienced, particularly by people undergoing some traumatic moment in their lives like a near-death experience. Steiner, as far as I know, is unique in pointing to ways in which it is possible, after much hard work, to achieve these revelations in full consciousness and at will. Francis Edmunds, in his introduction to Steiner's educational ideas, wrote of 'a progressive training towards the enhancement of thought itself so that it may reach out beyond the accepted limits of cognition.' This may all sound somewhat austere and cerebral, but what I did grasp all those years ago and what has increasingly interested me ever since is this recognition of our potential as human beings to know and experience more – above all in realms that were traditionally the preserve of initiates alone, and then usually in trance-like states. Such teachings are, of course, in direct opposition to Immanuel Kant's hugely influential utterances on the limits to human knowledge; though at that stage of my journey I had barely heard of Kant.

Central to Steiner's teaching on the subject of epistemology – the study of how we know what we know – is the notion of the evolution of consciousness. What we grasp clearly today and how we think about ourselves and the world around us is very different from a hundred, five hundred or five thousand years ago – different, and not always wiser. This theme, human consciousness in constant transition, is one which Owen Barfield explores with great insight in his book *Saving the Appearances*. In his massive work *The Ever-Present Origin*, Jean Gebser shares this view, believing we live in a period between two worlds, one dead and one trying to be born.

In trying to convey the changes that take place as human consciousness evolves, my Austrian friend Thomas Weihs used to evoke in his public lectures the image of early man alone at night with a candle in a huge dark forest. His overwhelming experience was of the forest surrounding him. Nowadays, so Weihs suggested, each one of us is equipped with a powerful beam of light which, wherever we point it, illuminates the details of the world with a sharp, clear focus. But by doing so we have lost all sense of the forest. 'Not seeing the wood for the trees' is an everyday expression that reveals our recognition of the same danger. The word 'blinkered' is also helpful in this respect because blinkers don't blind a horse, but simply ensure that it only looks in one direction and is not distracted by other stimuli. Consciousness has even been compared to a prison. When the sun shines we don't see the stars.

If there is any truth to this idea of an evolving consciousness and the notion that we have latent and as yet undeveloped faculties to see not just with, but through the eye, as William Blake suggested, then clearly it is very short-sighted and even arrogant to assume that evolution has come to a halt with us, either during the last years of the 18th century when Kant was alive or in our own time, at the start of the 21st century; arrogant, too, to assume there is nothing more evolved than us in the universe at large.

Reflecting on Bucke's illumination over a hundred years ago, Gary Lachman writes: 'Nowadays Bucke's experience would be chalked up to the brain's reported "God spot" or, less generously, to temporal lobe epilepsy. For Bucke it was the first glimpse of the future of humanity.'

Weihs's message, in that image of our ancestor armed only with a candle, was not that we should extinguish the powerful beam of light now available to us, but should try to bring the same clarity and insight we have about all the solid realities that surround us, to a rediscovery and contemplation of the whole, of the forest, and thus of the 'new world' that Gebser sensed was trying to be born. It is a task beautifully summed up in T.S. Eliot's much quoted lines from 'Little Gidding':

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.

As a result of reading Edmunds' booklet on Steiner education, I visited one of the schools, in Sussex, in the autumn of 1959. It was a crucial decision in terms of the quest I had already begun, and through the encounters that followed there awoke in me what I can only describe as a recognition of how that quest might unfold. Meanwhile I was immediately impressed by the relaxed and friendly atmosphere at Michael Hall School. It was co-educational and

non-streamed long before comprehensive schools came into existence. Each class was regarded as a little society in miniature, where everyone, whatever their strengths and weaknesses, was seen to have something to contribute.

What also struck me very favourably on that first visit to a Steiner school was that art was not just a separate and somewhat marginal subject, but permeated the whole curriculum. The children created their own textbooks, and in science, for example, these books contained not only all the facts and figures you would expect, but also beautiful drawings and diagrams of the human heart and lungs, a flower, the belly of a whale, a Greek temple and a volcano. Those are the images I still remember from that visit long ago. One of the teachers at the school, Christopher Mann, invited me to return, and through him, his family and his colleagues, I became increasingly interested in Steiner's work generally.

Three years after reading his booklet I was to meet Francis Edmunds himself. It was one of the most decisive encounters of my early adult life and led me along all sorts of helpful paths in my search for a better understanding of these riddles and mysteries that confront us. Edmunds was one of the pioneer teachers at the first Rudolf Steiner School in Britain, founded in 1925. This world-wide educational movement started in 1919 in Stuttgart, where the owner of the Waldorf cigarette factory, Emil Molt, asked Steiner to help found a school that would give the children of his factory workers a really meaningful and inspiring education. The term Waldorf School originates from this early initiative. Steiner developed the fundamentals of the curriculum and worked closely with the pioneer teachers.

Another aspect of the curriculum that I remember interesting me was the notion that the growing child's development recapitulates the whole cultural evolution of humanity. History in Steiner Waldorf schools is therefore taught chronologically, with an understanding for the natural affinity that children feel for the period of history that corresponds to their own stage of development. Myths and fairy stories inspire and nourish young children as they did our distant ancestors. Pupils will learn to build and create in the same way and in the same sequence that these skills unfolded in human history.

Puberty, so Edmunds suggests, can be compared historically to the passage from the Middle Ages into modern times:

> … an entry into a totally new relationship with the world … for the first time life becomes a personal affair, an individual questioning of existence in all things big and small … The wish arises to make one's life one's own … to question all things: oneself, the world, authority of parent and teacher … It is a moment of release; yet it brings with it added loneliness.

The theory is that by the time they leave school, pupils can step into today's world having lived through and experienced, as well as studied, the

journey that has made this world as it is, for better and for worse. In growing up they have also grown down – have 'fully incarnated', as some describe it. The evolution of consciousness can thus continue with a clearer awareness of what has so far formed it.

Theories are, of course, easier than practice. I have more to relate about Waldorf education and about Steiner himself, but at this stage I will only add that although I continue to take a great interest in this form of education I have a number of reservations, some of which are based on my own subsequent experience as a parent at a Steiner school.

Around this time I started to read the novels of Charles Morgan, a writer who seems almost forgotten these days – though not in France, which he knew well and where some of his stories are set; in fact it was a French friend who told me about his work. The novel I remember particularly well is called *The Riverline*, which Morgan subsequently rewrote as a play, and which is largely set in France during World War II. 'The Riverline' was the code name for an organisation run by the Belgians and the French to help British and American airmen who had been shot down in enemy-occupied territory to get home. They were passed through a series of safe houses into Spain, and for security reasons a strict set of rules was imposed on all those involved. One of these rules was that nothing written should be kept or carried by any of the airmen. One of the main characters, an enigmatic and mysterious officer called Heron, writes a poem which has to be completely destroyed almost immediately because of an imminent raid by the Germans. Later one of his companions asks him what the point was of writing a poem now lost and forgotten. 'I haven't the least desire', says Heron, 'to keep it or anything. It makes no difference what you keep. The thing was there before you had it and is still there when it seems to have gone.' Loss without losing becomes a crucial theme in the story that unfolds; it is a wonderful and profound piece of writing, like so much of Charles Morgan's work, and relates very closely to one of the major themes of this book – the apparent loss and separation when someone dies.

Another inspiration during my time at Pinewood was seeing Arnold Wesker's play *Roots* performed at The Royal Court Theatre in London. I write about it now because its central message strongly relates to the line 'What I do is me, for that I came' in Hopkins's poem. In *Roots* a young girl called Beatie returns for a visit to her Norfolk farming family from whom she has grown apart. She has been studying in London and is full of the ideas and passions of her socialist boyfriend Ronnie whom she quotes endlessly. But because they are not her ideas they carry no real power or conviction. Meanwhile she no longer shares the values and the interests of her family. She has lost her roots but not yet found her own voice, only Ronnie's. After two fractious weeks the whole family assemble to meet him.

As so often happens in life, it is tragedy that wakes her up. A letter arrives from Ronnie saying he doesn't think their relationship will work. Beatie is suddenly on her own, with no Ronnie behind her. But in that moment, instead of collapsing, she speaks for herself. She finds her tongue, as we say. This magnificent soliloquy at the end of the play, first performed by Joan Plowright, is above all a celebration of the birth of the individual. Like the kingfisher in Hopkins poem, she is unique – 'What I do is me.' She has discovered her identity. 'Listen to me someone', she cries out, 'God in heaven, Ronnie! It does work, it's happening to me, I can feel it's happened, I'm beginning, on my own two feet – I'm beginning …'

In recalling these various beacons that I remember from my early twenties it seems as though each one of us, at that period of our lives in particular, is looking, sometimes unwittingly, for support and confirmation of what already lives strongly just below the surface of our conscious existence. I have already used the word 'awakener', which is another way of trying to describe this mysterious process of discovering our tasks and indeed our destiny; during these years, especially, we often meet the people who will inspire and help us along the way. It was certainly true in my case. You could call them my gurus, and I meet them still. And they are not only old men with long white beards. Years later, while filming in California for the television series *The Long Search*, the American writer and philosopher Jacob Needleman suggested to us that a true guru is not someone who dishes out answers, but rather someone who deepens your questions. It is an insight that I have never forgotten, though I am also secretly in sympathy with that taxi-driver who, on recognising Bertrand Russell settling into the back of his cab, is said to have asked: 'So, Guv – what's it all about then?'

John Betjeman, whom I was soon to meet, was a good example of a wise and undogmatic human being who, although he had strong views on subjects like architecture and poetry, was reluctant to hold forth on deeper issues and on 'what's it all about'. He distrusted certainty to his very fingertips, and because of his openness and vulnerability he was able, I believe, to record his intimations in a number of profound yet deceptively simple poems, as well as on film.

As I touched on in Chapter One, this whole process of finding and recognising signposts for one's life can be experienced as a kind of remembering; and certainly some of the ideas we encounter can seem very familiar, hence their attraction. Plato said that all learning is a process of remembering. Yet, when it comes to understanding and knowledge, I am tempted to ask why, if we know something already, do we have to go through it all again? I am more drawn to the idea that these awakeners are premonitions of what we have yet to learn.

Another book that attracted my attention at this time was *The Phenomenon of Man* by the Jesuit biologist and palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin