

SOF Sift

A column in which Network members think out loud about SOF and their own quest.

From Richard Wood Penn (Northampton)

I have never had specific objectives in life and no particular burning ambition. For many years this seemed to me to be something about which I should feel guilty – and it bothered me a bit (not a lot) that I did not have any such feelings. And eventually I got around to Lao Tzu: *‘A good traveller has no fixed plans, and is not intent on arriving.’* Suddenly a breakthrough: I didn’t feel guilty about not feeling guilty.

Life, as Herman Melville said, *‘is a journey that is homeward bound’* as indeed, from a spiritual point of view, it is. In my case the journey started in the early 1950s when I was 7 or 8 years old with a question which followed a few days after my first – and only – visit to Sunday school. My upbringing was scrupulously neutral so far as any religious considerations were concerned; my visit to Sunday school was a result of my own wish to join in something most of my friends seemed to enjoy. I loved the Bible stories and the characters – and especially the illustrations and maps of the Holy Land – but in much the same way that I had enjoyed the adventures of Henry the Green Engine, Rupert Bear and Christopher Robin. Anyway, the question:

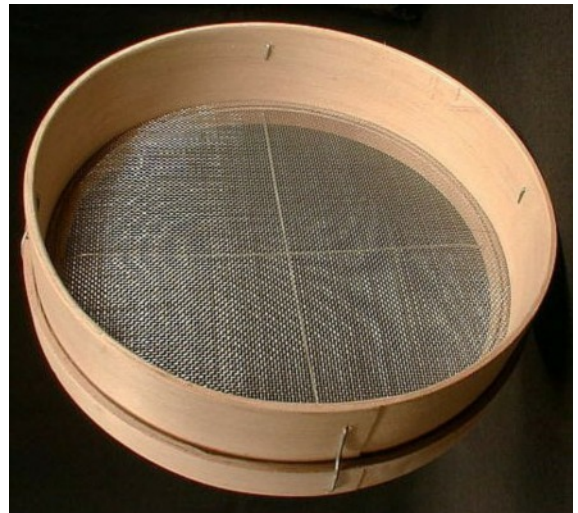
‘Mum, where is heaven and where is hell?’

The answer:

‘Here and now, on this Earth. It is the kind of life that you and only you can make for yourself and those around you.’

The conversation lasted about two minutes and I can recall it with crystal clarity – it took place in the kitchen of the house in which I was born and brought up. I accepted it as an absolute truth then and have never questioned it since. And that was that for the next 20 or so years – I just got on with work, marriage and family life – and reading. Reading habits – eclectic to say the least – mostly non-fiction; science (following school), mythology, radio-controlled models, history, social issues and restoration of classic cars. But something was focussing my sub-conscious – and it all started in 1984 with a BBC television series.

The Sea of Faith was presented by Don Cupitt (then Lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion and Dean of Emmanuel College Cambridge) and was accompanied by the publication of his book, the introduction to which read: On Dover beach in the 1860s, Matthew Arnold found an image of the decline of religion, the



‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’ of the Sea of Faith. Twenty years later Nietzsche was proclaiming the death of God. Notwithstanding this, Don Cupitt proposed that Christianity should be practised without dogma, as a spiritual path, an ethic, and a way of giving meaning to life. This opened up a to me the path which I have followed ever since:

*I give you the end of a golden string,
Only wind it into a ball,
It will lead you in at Heaven’s gate
Built in Jerusalem’s wall.*

Jerusalem – William Blake)

The next stage of my journey was to last another 25 years and it involved reading, lots of reading. One thing above all else with which I have come to terms is the utter inter-connectivity of all, most particularly the physical with the meta-physical.

And after all these years? A changed perspective – I had achieved ‘repentance’ but not in the accepted New Testament sense, rather as the original Greek language gospel meaning ‘change of consciousness’. In my case it was an awakening of consciousness – no longer was I guilty of Joseph Campbell’s ‘sin of inadvertence’, of not being alert, not quite awake’. And then in February 2009 I watched the series *Christianity* on Channel 4. In Episode 7 Professor Colin Blakemore discussed with the Rev. David Paterson the ‘Sea of Faith’. It could not be coincidence: I Googled ‘Sea of Faith’ and here I am... Funny old world, ain’t it?

If I may be permitted one final quotation, this time from T S Eliot’s *Four Quartets*:

*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.*

Contributions are invited from SOF members for this SOF Sift column (approximately 750 words). Pieces are especially welcome from those who have never written for *Sofia* before.