

## Prologue

There was a time – particularly in the mid-1970s – when I thought, “Enough! I don’t want to undergo further change” – life was becoming so hectic! But reasonable change is inevitable, and this book is about change, the need to evolve and to build bridges of peace between all of us on this planet.

Looking back to the time when I was growing up, I now realize that I was a member of that band of people that were being born into the Brave New World of television, jet aircraft and computers – and not least into the Nuclear Age. There was the identification of the DNA structure and other scientific breakthroughs. In the U.K. it was the last days of Empire, and the first days of the Welfare State. At school, writing was still done with pen and ink (the ink coming from an inkwell!), until I reached the age of 14, and I was then among the first to use the new cheap, disposable, **Bic**<sup>™</sup> ball-point pens. And they even came with a choice of ink-colour - amazing! All at once it seemed that the old world was disappearing in front of our eyes, but we still used slide-rules and log tables. Hand-held calculators and computers were still 10 or more years away, but rapid social change was shortly to become the norm.

My family did not have a T.V. until 1955, and the Queen’s Coronation in 1953, televised in ‘natural’ (!) black and white, could only be seen at my aunt’s house across the road, in company with many other members of the extended family. My aunt excelled in her supply of sandwiches, cakes and tea that day! I also remember the news that same month, of Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tensing reaching Everest’s summit. Although the news was relayed to us by radio and newspaper, relative to how news is now transmitted, it almost seems that the news had come via bush telegraph! My great-grandfather’s highly extreme pre-WW2 dictum that “*the civilized world ends at Dover*” seemed to be still something like the pervading attitude in Britain in those days. Black and Asian people were hardly to be seen, and it seemed the Church of England was still the essential mouthpiece of spiritual wisdom! Although the point did not occur to me in my earliest years, I later contemplated that the Church seemed to convey the impression that Christianity was somewhat divorced from other religions – that Jesus was, somehow, ‘western’.<sup>1</sup> And was religion just for Sundays?

That period seemed much more innocent in character – perhaps more so as I was still a child! But, as already intimated, there was something of a sinister air in respect of what opinions were held towards ‘foreigners’ and other religions, and children were still “to be seen but not heard”. As a child, however, the world then consisted of a great deal of wonderment, and in respect of the locality I was brought up in, there was full opportunity to explore what then amounted to a countryside within suburbia – bricks and cement were still far from covering up the acres of grassland and trees that existed nearby. Later in life I was to discover that the author J. R. Tolkien lived part of his childhood close to the nearby Sarehole Mill (Sarehole is now a suburb of Birmingham), and I understand that his childhood playings there later contributed to his highly imaginative writings. Small wonder, therefore, that I was also imbued with wonderment at what I found, although by then that suburbia was not what it was in Tolkien’s day when the River Cole and its locality supported otters and other, larger wild-life.

But I should not suggest that I only knew about the ‘good’ side of Birmingham. Many was the time we travelled to the north side to visit relations on my mother’s side, and passed-by the likes of Saltley Gasworks to get there (an experience that was repeated when I went to a technical school near Saltley in my teens).

In time, my father (as a bread-salesman) arranged for me to come and ‘help’ him on his rounds during school holiday times, and that experience became my one way of keeping close to my father until he changed jobs when I was eleven years of age. As with most fathers of that time, working hours were long and family life was an irregular aspect of our lives. On Sundays I was sent off to Sunday School, firstly C. of E., my father’s church, and then Methodist, my mother’s church; and then Boy’s Brigade. But my parents did not share church life with me, as Socialism was my father’s (and his brothers’) practical religion. Although from a keen church-going family, my mother had suspended her religious practice, but was a very open-hearted person with whom no-one could find fault. I was not, therefore, oppressed at home according to my parents’ perception of Biblical right and wrong, and the notion of ‘guilt’ was not as strong as with those brought up religiously, though it was present.

Even as a young teenager, and having read an encyclopaedic history of the Great War at my aunt’s house across the road, I felt guilty that my life was unlikely to require sacrifice to warfare in the way of those who fought and died in that War. Why should my life be clear of such commitment, and their’s

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<sup>1</sup> Many years later, when meeting a *Christian* Arab and hearing his pronouncement of “*Allahu akbar!*” (“God is great(est)” – an expression mostly associated with Islam) did it finally sink into me how closely related all religions are.

not? Was I supposed to 'make up' for this situation by taking on a conscience-driven life? Did I need to justify my existence? Was I supposed to fear God? What was this Jesus crucifixion thing all about?

My conscience was in particular shaken up when visiting some country cousins (younger than me – I was 14). I led them astray to play games in a local cornfield, and after trampling a fair amount of the crop we were caught out by the farmer, who instantly identified me, the oldest and biggest, as the ringleader! For a while I was shaking in my shoes, but he let us go with a stern warning! "Is that all that happened?!", I hear you say, but that event did teach me something – that everything in nature is precious; that the Great Gardener continually toils to produce everything that we need, and that if we do not learn about how to cease wanton destruction, then we are the losers.

By the age of 14 I was a little in awe of the nature of Jesus, and began to be questioning of many things, including the nature of 'self', and I was confused about the relationship of church to Socialism. I was also puzzled by what 'Jacob's ladder' might refer to. Thoughts of becoming a monk actually and seriously crossed my mind at one point. I was conscious of wanting to look at life simply, and in fact had never taken my school studies too seriously.<sup>2</sup> There were arguments with my father about the nature of politics and other topics! What it was that triggered off the spark of thought in me, I am not clear. Whether it was a single event, or an accumulation of experiences, I do not know. What I do remember is how original ideas could be suppressed by the educational system at the time; my observation to a teacher that it was possible that the Americas were once inter-locked with Europe and Africa was thrown aside without further ado! Later on, I became aware of how international history was slanted to the British/European view on things.

In the early 60s, and thus 10 years after the Coronation, 'we' experienced The Beatles, the Mini car (and cars at affordable prices to many), a totally new genre of fashion and art forms, the start of cheap air travel for the ordinary person, and also the notion of a 'disposable society'. Gradually, the notion of going out for a 'Chinese' – and later for a curry – became the 'done' thing. Life, by then, had become 'exciting' for young people, but also more perplexing if you bothered to stop and think for one minute... Certainly, the class-based society, together with much hypocrisy, seemed headed for its last days, but what was going to replace it? Everything was questioned in the 60s, and there was no harm in that in principle, especially perhaps, because there was always the fear of a nuclear holocaust, which brought about the CND movement. And from thus came the protest songs via Bob Dylan, Joan Baez et al. But above all it seemed that this was the decade of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

For the first time in 2,000 years, many people in the Western world had found the freedom and inclination to experiment – thereby testing their own sense of conscience and balance. This situation was encouraged by the appearance in 1963 of the book *Honest to God*, by the Bishop of Woolwich, John Robinson, who seemed to suggest that the atheist might be right! That book did really seem to put the cat amongst the pigeons!

Disregarding the more hedonistic approaches that some took in this new atmosphere, many forms of 'new' spiritual thought suddenly sprang to the surface to be available to the ordinary person. If The Beatles were to find some sense in their Maharishi, and with the relatively recent achievements of Mahatma Gandhi in mind, the implied question posed to the young was that shouldn't everyone look eastwards – at least on a trial basis? But I was a few years late in picking up on this idea! I had in the meantime succumbed to pressure to conform to society's norms – particularly that our lives would somehow be safer under the protection of the developments in science and technology. Religion by then seemed to be taking on a darker hue and seemed to be on the way out. I didn't quite have the nerve to presume that I had the right to challenge what seemed to me to be an improving society at the time.

A few years late or not, it was perhaps just as well, as it had given me chance to focus my life at a practical and responsible level for a reasonable time, acquiring substantial experience of life and perhaps no little maturity to go with it. It had also taken me into my thirties. When I did emerge from that life in the mid-1970s, there was a plethora of writings emerging on western man's 'alternative views' based on a new way of looking at things, including the developing subjects of ecology and self-sufficiency. There were also the strangely fascinating books by the likes of Jon Michel and his books on Stonehenge and The Giza Pyramids etc., and Dr. Lyall Watson's '*Supernature*'. After arriving in London I found many opportunities to attend meetings where prominent persons led public

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<sup>2</sup> Later this fact was not an impediment to my rise in my working life, which I subsequently concluded was not without an invisible Helping Hand!

discussions on subjects of this kind, and also the alternative perspectives on technology and the democratization of workforces, as suggested in *'Small is Beautiful'* by E. Schumacher.

The following years saw the appearance of much more spiritually reflective material such as R. Pirsig's *'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance'*, and the much later *'Celestine Prophecy'* series by James Redfield, in the 1990s. The *'Celestine Prophecy'* series is indeed insightful, in my opinion, into key aspects of a truly spiritual life, and part of my own experiences relate to the content of the *'Celestine Prophecy'*. In his later work, *'The Tenth Insight'*, Redfield states, through the words of his heroes:

"When we remember what we're really supposed to do in life, it can restore our health. When we remember what all of humanity is supposed to do ... we can heal the world".

"Our guiding intuitions become most clear when we approach business from an evolutionary perspective ... Instead of asking what product or service I can develop to make the most money, we're beginning to ask 'What can I produce that liberates and informs and makes the world a better place, yet also preserves a delicate environmental balance?'".

James Redfield, Walter Starcke and Peter Russell are but three of the current generation's spiritual philosophers that are helping to create, by their efforts, a higher realm of thought. Their theme is about *spiritual* evolution. They have been joined by others, including Neale Donald Walsch and his fascinating *'Conversations with God'* series.

Change in society and in thinking seemed to be progressing at an exponential rate, and Alvin Toffler's *'Future Shock'* (1970) was a warning against pressing on the accelerator too hard, and reflected on the need to manage swift changes in living patterns!

I am now certain in my own mind that life has, despite seemingly opposing indicators, been witness to increasing developments that have been part of a progressive elevation of consciousness in the West in the last 100 to 150 years. The appendix alludes to two personages who were early suppliers of help in this regard, namely Blavatsky and Gurdjieff. They brought matters of spiritual knowledge to the fore in the West in a manner virtually unheard of previously, and also with the input of *The Rosicrucians*, laid the ground for many further incursions into spirituality over the years since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In retrospect, what Blavatsky and Gurdjieff taught can now be seen to have real worth, but at the time there were many who were all too ready to deride their efforts and claim that they were frauds. *Perfecti* they may not have been, but in sincerity and conviction they lacked little. Since the 1920s the West has become greatly more aware of Eastern thought and teachings, so that the work of Maharishis, Buddhists and Sufi teachers has become almost a normality in the West, and fully open to the general public.



Khalifa Nargis (see photo, a follower of the Sufi teacher Inayat Khan) is frequently quoted from her book *'The Way of Return'*, published in 1952. Further, I refer to the *Theosophical Society*, which has long been an inspiration in its recognition of the truth in the unity of all religions, and its work in promoting the inner (Gnostic) knowledge. I include extracts from *'The Life After Death'* by C. W. Leadbeater, first published by the *Theosophical Society* in 1912. But many other quotations are also used and there are a number of appendices to expand on some matters, including sections on the origins of the *Theosophical Society*, and some extracts of writings by its co-founder, H. P. Blavatsky.

However, discussion about the subject of spirituality inevitably brings us in the West back to trying to understand the words of Jesus. I hope that through also examining the teachings of other wisdoms we may come closer to a better understanding, for if we could begin to believe that all spiritual paths have equal validity and that the essence of what Jesus said is the important issue, then God willing we might be able to understand and love ourselves from a universal standpoint, without prejudice. The world, for sure, needs love to be expressed by each individual to another, each community to another and each nation to another, regardless of creed or background. With Jesus being also the common link between the Jews and the Muslims, how much more so should it be possible for successful, loving, communication to take place between Jews, Christians, Muslims and Sikhs. And if we can go that far, then between all religions!

I must make it clear that I do not regard myself as a spiritual teacher. My evaluation of spiritual paths has, I suspect, been over-cerebral over the years. Only spasmodically do I think that I have relaxed my

brain sufficiently to see sparks of light. Therefore, being far from perfect, I have done all I can in this book to cause some of the Masters, academic experts and other seekers to speak on the core of the matter!

It is left to the reader to make up his or her own mind on this subject matter, and then to delve further if needed. I hope this book will be interesting at least. Better, I hope it will be thought provoking. Even better, I hope it helps to inspire.

With love: John Lerwill  
London, December, 2004