Spiritual Research: Casting Knowledge into Love

David Mitchell and Douglas Gerwin

What exactly is spiritual research, and how is it different from other forms of enquiry? These questions, and others like them, go to the heart of what Rudolf Steiner called the practice of spiritual science, or anthroposophy.* They were also at the center of an unusual forum held this spring in New York City, for which some 200 participants assembled to discuss the purpose and the method of spiritual research. The weekend was held on the top floor of New York University's Kimmel Center, with walls of 20-foot-high windows that offered a breathtaking view of Manhattan's distinctive skyline. In the sparkling darkness of a Friday evening and a dazzling all-day Saturday, each presenter attempted to respond to these seminal questions, or at least to cast them in a new light.

Among the presenters were Christopher Bamford, writer and editor, Claire Blatchford, author and spiritual researcher, Claudia Keel, herbalist and flower essence practitioner, Georg Kühlewind, philosopher and writer, Michael Lipson, therapist, Paul O'Leary, spiritual researcher and lawyer, David Spangler, writer and co-founder of Findhorn, and Arthur Zajonc, professor of quantum physics at Amherst College.

In his introductory address, Christopher Bamford emphasized that as spiritual researchers we need to purge ourselves of personal egotism, which holds us in the grip of the past and prevents us from the practice of spiritual research. This is because this kind of research can occur only in the genius of the present moment. He pointed to two key requirements. The first is to work out of what the poet John Keats called "negative capability"—the willingness to live in the unknowing. Indeed, Chris suggested that whereas much of what we call research today is in search of understanding the known, spiritual research seeks the unknown. The second requirement is to be willing to pursue research without desire for explanation or causes. The Romantic poets would have called this the "willing suspension of disbelief."

In the presence of such an approach, a skeptical question can arise: How does one verify the results of spiritual research, especially if they rely so heavily upon the moral integrity of the researcher? To this question Chris replied: "By their fruits shall ye know them"— that is, the veracity of spiritual research can be known by the quality and productiveness of the fruits of this research.

Arthur Zajonc followed these opening remarks with a presentation entitled "The Alchemy of the

*For David Mitchell's reflections on the question, "What is spiritual research?" please refer to the inset at the end of this article.

Senses: Finding the Inside Outside." In his clear and scholarly style, Arthur took the audience on an educational journey to three domains. The first he characterized as the "sense world," where both spiritual and natural scientific research begin, but where natural science all too easily gets stuck, resorting then to abstract models to explain the phenomena of the sense world. By contrast, spiritual science, working with what the poet and scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe called "a delicate empiricism," seeks not information but, rather, transformation of the sense world.

The second domain is that of the supersensible, in which pure sense perception becomes the basis for spiritual organs and capacities free of the body. The senses then no longer create distortions of reality but become doorways to it. Both inner silence and inner attention are prerequisite. Rudolf Steiner called this kind of open, unprejudiced, being-in-the-presence a "living thinking." It is as though we are stripped naked before God, standing with the openness of a child. Plato compared this condition to stepping from a dark cave and being dazzled by the intensity of the light.

The third and final domain is that of the subsensible (for instance the realms beneath the visible world of light explored by quantum optics). Here our task is to redeem at least a part of this world through spiritual research so that, in Steiner's words, the subsensible can be offered up to the gods, transformed.

Arthur rounded out his talk by asking: How does one develop the necessary "intimacy" with the world of the senses so that the process of spiritual transformation can unfold through them? For it is crucial, he said, that the "outside world" begins to live on in our own "inside world" so that sense experience can be lifted as sacrament into what Steiner calls Imagination. In this transformation an empty space is created into which grace can descend. Grace, said Arthur, is the sole exception to gravity—but it lives only where a space has been emptied.

For the spiritual researcher, three aspects are key:

- Attend to transformation, in which all is in movement;
- Attend not to objects but the relationships of objects (for instance paying attention to what happens between you and someone, rather than attending to your own emotions or those of the other);
- Develop moral intuition, recognizing that these relationships are moral and dense with meaning.

The fruit of this work is "love"; wisdom grows in love and the human beings are the seedlings.

David Spangler brought us imaginatively to Morocco where he lived with his family as a five-year-old child. One day his father was driving to the city of Marrakesh. His parents were in the front seat and he was in the rear looking out the window. He remembered seeing a ditch with women washing clothes in the time-honored fashion, pounding them on rocks. Behind the women, up the bank, rose a line of modern, concrete apartment buildings under construction, and off to one side stood a large billboard advertising NeHi Orange Soda. Suddenly, he felt himself exiting his body and rising up into the air so that he could observe the car, his parents, and himself. He then reviewed his entire life in pictures. This review he experienced as lasting several hours. Suddenly his perspective returned to the back seat of the car and as he glanced out of the window he could see that the billboard and the ad for NeHi Orange Soda had shifted only slightly in his visual field. So began for him a life-long study including many subsequent meetings with a supersensible teacher named "John," who would appear to him dressed in a Harris tweed sports jacket. When David asked him why he wore a Harris tweed sports jacket, John replied, "Because that is how you expected to see me dressed."

David's encounter with the supersensible worlds came to him as a gift, as something that he chose to acknowledge, follow, and investigate. It led him to a life-long research project into the nature of incarnation—not his own specifically but the incarnation

generally of spirit in matter. His teacher said to him that there is suffering in the world because we are not yet sufficiently incarnate. (He distinguished having a physical body from being fully incarnate in it.) Describing his approach to research, he related that he would start with what he knew but would try to set this knowledge in motion, "like a juggler," for he said it is not knowledge but the movement created by knowledge that is important to this work. As a next step, he would enter a space of stillness in the middle of the whirling movement, like stepping into the eye of a hurricane, and from there reach out with love to that which was in motion around—experiencing a "heightened sense of relationship to the artifacts of my surroundings."

Paul O'Leary gave a warm and light-hearted presentation on the conditions that precede any spiritual research and how one must prepare oneself so that the results are reliable. Paul was kind enough to share the text of his talk, from which the quotations that follow were excerpted:

> The problem with conducting spiritual research begins and ends, like all other problems, with ourselves. We are protected by the gods from seeing something we are not ready to see with ourselves. We are protected from ourselves, protected from what we might do with such insight should we enjoy it prior to having acquired the necessary moral development to handle it ethically. 'Spiritual Research,' by definition, requires spiritual self-development.
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> You can try to promote spiritual development by avoiding tomatoes or coffee or watching television. You can clothe yourself in all organic cotton and wool, drink only spring water, and refuse to use a cell phone. You can read or attend lecture after lecture and do Eurythmy or tai chi or yoga every day. But you are not going to achieve entry into the objective spiritual world unless you change yourself, unless you transform yourself.
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> The path of spiritual development is both a moral path as well as a cognitive path. Steiner says so himself in his Golden Rule of Spiritual Science: Three steps should be taken in your moral development for each step taken in your cognitive development. Moral development is the precondition for proper cognitive development. If you can make three times as much moral progress as cognitive progress, spiritual sight will come as a result of purifying the soul (astral body) and purifying the will.
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> Before Enlightenment comes the stage of Purification or Catharsis. This thought is encapsulated in Rudolf Steiner's inscription into Marie Steiner's copy of the esoteric guidebook *Light on the Path*: 'Seek for the Light on the Path, yet you seek it in vain unless you, yourself, become light.'
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> The difficult, grueling, even torturous process of Purification of the soul requires self-knowledge. 'Self-observation is the first beginning in the observation of the Spirit,' says Steiner. Before you can purify anything, you first have to identify it, become aware of it, cognize it. Self-knowledge requires a kind of Spiritual Striptease, where you peal away the layers of Self, like the layers of an onion, to get at the core of your identity, your individuality.
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> And what do we discover when we peer within our nature? We learn that we are made of selfishness, of egotism. As Chris Bamford pointed out last night, in our egotism we remain locked into the past, into what we already are, into the 'what we have become.' And this selfishness is the primary cause of evil in the world. If you think about it deeply enough, you will eventually find that the source of every evil action lies in one or another form of Self-Love, Lucifer's great gift to humanity.
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> Self-love goes deep. Yes, we love others; but oh my goodness, do we love ourselves above all. First, last, and always. As Ambrose Bierce wrote, 'I' or 'Me' is the first word in the language, the first thought of the mind, the first object of affection. 'It's all about me!' is a phrase which has entered the language of common usage. It speaks of our age's continuing preoccupation

with one's Self. People have a great fear of probing below the surface, of acknowledging what lies below, of opening that trap door at the base of the psyche. Most self-knowledge is merely a Luciferic Self-Reflection. Where real self-knowledge exists, self-love ends. And the contrary is likewise true: where self-love begins, self-knowledge ends.

It takes great courage to dive consciously into the Lower Nature in order to transform it. In our Lower Nature we encounter the monsters within our own soul: the tyrant, the sadist, the martinet, the jealous lover, the holder of the grudge, the self-pitying victim, the pervert, the liar, the cheat, the addict, the humorless know-it-all, the cruel idealist who will kill you . . . but only for a 'moral reason.' And of course, last but not least, we find within us the betrayer, the Judas in our own soul, who betrays not only friends and family, but above all, betrays our own Higher Nature.

The archetypal experience of confronting what lies in the subconscious is shown in the Gospels when the Christ, the Logos, immediately after the Baptism goes into the 'wilderness' and experiences the Three Temptations. These appear as the temptations of Power, Sex (or the instinct life), and Money. Power, Sex, and Money . . . the temptations that live within the fallen Astral Body, Etheric Body, and Physical Body.

One criticism of Anthroposophy is that it has no Shadow Side, no Dark Side, that it doesn't deal with the primal forces motivating human beings: power, sex, and money. That it fails to address Man's innate will to destroy the very things he loves: Man the killer, the scourge of this Earth, who brings death and destruction to himself, his fellow creatures, and perhaps to the entire planet. However, Anthroposophy deals deeply with the causes of human evil, the sources of human evil. Esoteric Science teaches that the Human Being is the Microcosm of the Macrocosm. Man is the Little World; the Universe is the Great World, or as Chris Bamford put it in his book, *A Never Ending Trace*, we may be a Small Universe, but conversely, the Universe is a Big Person!

We have within us the butterfly and the rose, as well as the crocodile, the scorpion, the rattlesnake, and the maggot. We have within us sunny skies and starry nights. But we also have rainy days, hurricanes and tornados, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, too. 'Nature is Human Nature' . . . made large.

Anthroposophy points not only to the Supersensible Worlds and to the spiritual within the world of Nature, it also points to Subsensible Worlds, the world of Sub-Nature, the very world which Arthur Zajonc mentioned last night it is his destiny to investigate. This is the world below the surface of the Earth, a world containing the Luciferic, Ahrimanic, and Azuric counter-hierarchies within the nine layers of the Subterranean Spheres which are the negative or counter-realms of those in the supersensible worlds.

For balanced self-development/spiritual research, the higher your penetration reaches into the supersensible or spiritual worlds, the deeper must be your penetration and transformation of the subsensible or Subterranean worlds if your spirituality is not to take on a luciferic character. For each new level you ascend, you must also consciously descend, so as to maintain the balance of the 'Middle.'

Self-knowledge contains, however, two parts. One is knowledge of the Self and of the Lower Nature: peering within your own depths, understanding objectively what you are made of. However, this merely leads to knowledge of what we already are, the 'given.' The other half of Self Knowledge comes after purification of the soul (astral body), after breaking through the fetters of subjectivity into the objective world of the spirit, into knowledge of the Cosmic Human Being. We are the Microcosm; we penetrate past our own limited, subjective natures into the objective Macrocosm. And therein lies the con-

> nection of Spiritual Research with Self Knowledge. We have come full circle: The Universe is just another form of Man.
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> After overcoming self-love, and loving the world, the self is not extinguished, it is not lost. No. Unlike the doctrines of Eastern Wisdom, the self is not abandoned. Unlike conventional Christianity the self is not repressed or replaced. Preservation of the uniqueness of each human personality is a fundamental principle of Esoteric Christianity. Thus the Resurrected Christ is also known, esoterically, as 'The Divine Personality.' The limitations of the individual self are overcome, and the self is experienced as being one with the Cosmic Self, the Cosmic Human Being. Then you naturally 'love your neighbor as yourself.' Self-love remains, but is objectified, as your self has become one with the world.

Paul concluded:

> So, in a very real sense, all spiritual research is a form of Self Knowledge: knowledge of the self leads to knowledge of the world; and knowledge of the world leads eventually to self knowledge. The topic of Spiritual Research leads to depths upon depths and is veritably inexhaustible."

Not included in Paul's presentation is the increasing dislike of the self that, according to therapeutic journals, is appearing at an alarming rate. The polarity of self-love is self-loathing. Many modern human beings struggle with defining themselves against standards of appearance, conformative thinking, and political correctness. Those who follow this false path may begin to hate both life and themselves. The spiritual researcher who feels the pull of these forces on his or her soul must exercise incredible forces of will to keep balanced. The antidote is quiet contemplation, moral striving, and a relentless pursuit of knowledge. Knowledge is the prerequisite of universal love and love is the result of wisdom being born anew in the ego.

Claire Blatchford, who has conducted research as a deaf person her entire adult life, spoke briefly of three basic guideposts to her work:

1. Eyes tell a different story from the mouth—it helps to watch the lines around the mouth.
2. There is no such thing as absolute silence; there are always inner voices to be heard.
3. Help is near.

She stressed the need to pose questions, but questions that are honest, questions that are real (not hypothetical), and questions for which one is willing to be patient and, when they come, be grateful. There were also valuable contributions by Michael Lipson, who described a case study in which he risked all to move a psychology patient through a life crisis, and by Claudia Keel, who related some examples from her work with flower essences. In addition, Georg Kühlewind spoke of his experience with what he called "star children," a topic he has written about in an earlier issue of the *Research Bulletin* (Volume VIII, Number 2).

At the end of this varied and rich weekend, Arthur Zajonc returned to the podium to lead the participants through an exercise of spiritual observation and to reflect one last time on the question that had been woven throughout the presentations. Citing the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, Arthur stressed the need for each of us to stand guard over the solitude of the other. In that sense our task is to ask of each other, "What can I do to help you live most authentically as the person you have elected to be?" This we offer without any interest in converting the other philosophically, religiously, or semantically to our personal perspective. Each of us, he suggested, has a path of spiritual research to tread, and each path will be quite specific. The risk of success along the way is that we may mistake our way for *the* way. Here the friendship with others can help us to protect ourselves from solipsistic myopia.

In this regard, Arthur developed the idea of spiritual research in a quite new direction—namely as an activity not only of transforming one's solitary self, but ultimately of forging spiritual friendships. Whether with other human beings or with those powers greater than we are who come to our aid when we seek their help, spiritual research comes down to building friendship.

Herein Arthur, and the presenters who spoke earlier during the weekend, were characterizing a spiritual research for the future, in which human beings reach out in community to wrestle with true reality. He likened this work to the labors of Hiram Abif, the founder of Freemasonry, who cast the Brazen Sea,[1] a large laver of brass placed in Solomon's temple for use by the priests. The bronze casting was completed successfully only by forming an alloy of the seven planetary metals into an amalgam. Could the modern metamorphosis of this idea be the task of spiritual research in the future, in which relationships forge new insights into the supersensible?

1. The dimensions of the Brazen Sea (I Kings vii. 23-26) were as follows: height, 5 cubits; circumference, 30 cubits (consequently it was about 10 cubits in diameter); and a handbreadth in thickness. It was capable of holding 2,000 "baths"; on the smallest calculation, about 17,000 gallons. "Under the brim of it round about there were knops which did compass it, for ten cubits compassing the sea round about; the knops were cast in two rows, when it was cast." This great brazen vessel was set on the backs of twelve brazen oxen; three of them facing each cardinal point, and all of them facing outward. See *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 2005, and Virginia Sease and Manfred Schmidt-Brabant, *Paths of the Christian Mysteries* (Forest Row, Sussex, England: Temple Lodge Press, 2003).

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