

# Chance Encounters as the Walls Close In...

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*"A treasure stumbled upon, suddenly; not gradually accumulated, by adding one to one. The accumulation of learning, 'adding to the sum-total of human knowledge'; lay that burden down, that baggage, that impediment. Take nothing for your journey; travel light." – Norman O. Brown, Love's Body*

These are "heavy" times, colloquially speaking.

Forebodings everywhere.

Everything broken.

People on edge, nervous, filled with anxiety about they know not what since it seems to be everything.

The economy, politics, elections, endless propaganda, the war in Ukraine, censorship, the environment, nuclear war,

Covid/vaccines, a massive world-wide collapse, the death of democratic possibilities, the loss of all innocence as a very weird and dangerous future creeps upon us, etc.

Only the most anesthetized don't feel it.

The anxiety has increased even as access to staggering amounts of knowledge – and falsehoods – has become available with the click of a button into the digital encyclopedia.

The CIA's MK-Ultra mind control program has gone digital.

The more information, the more insubstantial the world seems, but it is not an insubstantiality that connects to hope or faith but to despair.

Across the world people are holding their breath. What's next?

Roberto Calasso, the late great Italian writer, wrote that we live in “the unnamable present,” which seems accurate. Information technology, with its easily available marriage of accurate and fraudulent information, affects people at the fathomless depths of the mind and spirit.

Yet it is taken-for-granted that the more such technological information there is available, as well as the ease with which one can add one’s two-cents to it, is a good thing, even as those powerful deep-state forces that control the Internet pump out an endless stream of purposely dissembling and contradictory messages.

Delusions of omnipotence and chaos everywhere, but not in the service of humanity.

Such chaos plays in chords D and C – Depressing and Controlling.

In the midst of this unnamable present, all of us need to dream of beauty and liberation even as we temporarily rely on digital technology for news of the wider world.

For the local news we can step outside and walk and talk to people, but we can’t endlessly travel everywhere, so we rely on the Internet for reports from elsewhere.

Even as we exercise great effort to discern facts from fictions through digital’s magic emanations, we hunger for some deeper experiences than the ephemerality of this unnamable world. Without it we are lost in a forest of abstractions.

While recently dawdling on a walk, I stopped to browse through tables of free books on the lawn of my local library. I was looking for nothing but found something that startled me: a few descriptive words of a child’s experience.

I chanced to pick up an old (1942), small autobiography by the English historian, A. L. Rowse – *A Cornish Childhood*. The flyleaf informed me that it was the story of his pre-World War I childhood in a little Cornish village in southwestern England. The son of a china-clay worker and mother of very modest means, Rowse later went on to study at Oxford and became a well-known scholar and author of about a hundred books. In other words, a man whose capacious mind was encyclopedic long before the Internet offered its wares of information about everything from A to Z.

Since my grandfather, the son of an Irish immigrant father and English mother, had spent his early years working in a bobbin factory in Bradford, England, a polluted mill town in the north, before sailing at age 11 from Liverpool to New York City aboard the Celtic with his four younger siblings sans parents,

I had an interest in what life was like for poor children in England during that era. How circumstances influenced them: two working-class boys, one who became an Oxford graduate and well-known author; the other who became a NYC policeman known only to family and friends. The words Rowse wrote and I read echoed experiences that I had had when young; I wondered if my grandfather had experienced something similar. Rowse writes this on pages 16-17 where I randomly opened the book:

A little group of thatched cottages in the middle of the village had a small orchard attached; and I remember well the peculiar purity of the blue sky seen through the white clusters of apple-blossom in spring. I remember being moon-struck looking at it one morning early on my way to school. It meant something for me; what I couldn’t say.

It gave me an unease at heart, some reaching outwards toward perfection such as impels men into religion, some sense of the transcendence of things, of the fragility of our hold upon life . . . . I could not know then that it was an early taste of aesthetic sensation, a kind of revelation which has since become a secret touchstone of experience for me, an inner resource and consolation. . . .

In time it became my creed – if that word can be used of a religion which has no dogma, no need of dogma; for which this ultimate aesthetic experience, this apprehension of the world and life as having value essentially in the moment of being apprehended *qua* beauty, I had no need of religion. . . . in that very moment it seemed that time stood still, that for a moment time was held up and one saw experience as through a rift across the flow of it, a shaft into the universe. But what gave such poignancy to the experience was that, in the very same moment that one felt time standing still, one knew at the back of the mind, or with another part of it, that it was moving inexorably on, carrying oneself and life with it.

So that the acuity of the experience, the reason why it moved one so profoundly, was that at bottom it was a protest of the personality against the realization of its final extinction. Perhaps, therefore, it was bound up with, a reflex action from, the struggle for survival. I could get no further than that; and in fact have remained content with that.

I quote so many of Rowse's words because they seem to contain two revelations that pertain to our current predicament.

One a revelation that opens onto hope;

the other a revelation of hopelessness.

On the one hand, Rouse writes beautifully about how a patch of blue sky through apple blossoms (and his reading Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality*) could open his heart and soul to deep aesthetic consolation. Calasso, in discussing "absolute literature" and the *Bhagavad Gita in Literature and the Gods*, refers to this experience with the word *ramaharsa* or horripilation, the happiness of the hairs.

It is that feeling one has when one experiences a thrill so profound that a shiver goes down one's spine and one experiences an epiphany. Your hairs and other body parts stand up, whether it's from a patch of blue, a certain spiritual or erotic/love encounter, or a line of poetry that takes your breath away. Such a thrill often happens through a serendipitous stumbling.

For Rouse, the epiphany was bounded, like a beautiful bird with its wings clipped; it was an "aesthetic experience" that seemed to exclude something genuinely transcendent in the experiential and theological sense. Maybe it was more than that when he was young, but when this scholar described it in his 39<sup>th</sup> year, this intellectual could only say it was aesthetic.

C. S. Lewis, in the opening pages of *The Abolition of Man*, echoing Coleridge's comment about two tourists at a waterfall, one who calls the waterfall pretty and the other who calls it sublime (Coleridge endorsing the later and dismissing the former with disgust), writes, "The feelings which make a man call an object sublime are not sublime feelings but feelings of

veneration.”

In other words, the sublime nature of a patch of blue sky through apple blossoms in the early morn cannot be reduced to a person’s subjective feelings but is objectively true and a crack into the mystery of transcendence. To see it as a protest against one’s personal extinction and to be content to “get no further than that” is to foreclose the possibility that what the boy felt was not what the man thought; or to quote Wordsworth about what seems to have happened to Rouse: “Shades of the prison house begin to close/Upon the growing boy,” and that is that.

But we are even a longer way gone from when Rouse wrote his remembrances.

In our secular Internet age, first society and now its technology, not aesthetics or the religion of art, have replaced God for many people, who, like Rouse, have lost the ability to experience the divine. It embarrasses them. Something – an addiction to pseudo-knowledge? – blocks their willingness to be open to surpassing the reasoning mind. We think we are too sophisticated to bend that low even when looking up. “The pseudomorphism between religion and society” has passed unobserved, as Calasso puts it:

It all came together not so much in Durkheim’s [French sociologist 1858-1917] claim that “the religious is the social,” but in the fact that suddenly such a claim *sounded natural*. What was left in the end was naked society, but invested now with all the powers inherited, or rather burgled, from religion. The twentieth century would see its triumph. The theology of society severed every tie, renounced all dependence, and flaunted the distinguishing feature: the tautological, the self-advertising. The power and impact of totalitarian regimes cannot be explained unless we accept that the very notion of society has appropriated an unprecedented power, one previously the preserve of religion. . . . Being anti-social would become the equivalent of sinning against the Holy Ghost. . . . Society became the subject above all subjects, for whose sake everything is justified.

For someone like Rouse, the Oxford scholar and bibliophile, writing in the midst of WW II about his childhood before WW I, an exquisite aesthetic explanation suffices to explain his experience, one that he concludes was perhaps part of an evolutionary reflex action connected to the struggle for survival. Thus this epiphany of beauty is immured in sadness rather than opening out into possible hope. Lovely as his description is, it is caged in inevitability, as if to say: Here is your bit of beauty on your way to dusty death. It is a denial of freedom, of spiritual reality, of what Lewis refers to for brevity’s sake as ‘the Tao,’ what the Chinese have long meant as the great thing, the correspondence between the outer and the inner, a reality beyond causality and the controlling mind.

Now even beauty has been banned behind machine experiences. But the question of beauty is secondary to the nature of reality and our connection to it.

The fate of the world depends upon it. When the world is too much with us and doom and gloom are everywhere, where can we turn to find a way forward to find a place to stand to fight the evils of nuclear weapons, poverty, endless propaganda, and all the other assorted demons marauding through our world?

It will not be to machines or more information, for they are the essence of too-muchness. It will not come from concepts or knowledge, which Nietzsche said made it possible to avoid

pain. I believe it will only come from what he suggested: "To make an experiment of one's very life – this alone is freedom of the spirit, this then became for me my philosophy." And before you might think, "Look where it got him, stark raving mad," let me briefly explain.

Nietzsche may seem like an odd choice to suggest as insightful when it comes to openness to a spiritual dimension to experience since he is usually but erroneously seen as someone who "killed God." Someone like Gandhi might seem more appropriate with his "experiments with truth." And of course Gandhi is very appropriate.

But so too are Emerson, Thoreau, Jung, and many others, at least in my limited sense of what I mean by experiment. I mean experimenting-experiencing (both derived from the same Latin word, *expereri*, to try or test) by assuming through an act of faith or suspension of disbelief that if we stop trying to control everything and open ourselves to serendipitous stumbling, what may seem like simply beautiful aesthetic experiences may be apertures into a spiritual energy we were unaware of. James W. Douglass explores this possibility in his tantalizing book, *Lightning East to West: Jesus, Gandhi, and the Nuclear Age*, when he asks and then explores this question: "Is there a spiritual reality, inconceivable to us today, which corresponds in history to the physical reality which Einstein discovered and which led to the atomic bomb?"

I like to think that my grandfather, although a man not very keen on things spiritual, might have, in his young years amidst the grime and fetid air of Bradford, chanced to look up and saw a patch of blue sky through the rising smoke and felt the "happiness of the hairs" that opened a crack in his reality to let the light in.

Roberto Calasso quotes this from Nietzsche:

That huge scaffolding and structure of concepts to which the man who must cling in order to save himself in the course of life, for the liberated intellect is merely a support and a toy for his daring devices. And should he break it, he shuffles it around and ironically reassembles it once more, connecting what is least related and separating what is closest. By doing so he shows that those needful ploys are of no use to him and that he is no longer guided by concepts but by intuitions.

I have an intuition that there are hierophanies everywhere, treasures to be stumbled upon – by chance. If we let them be.

My eyes already touch the sunny hill,  
going far ahead of the road I have begun.  
So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;  
It has its inner light, even from a distance –

And changes us, even if we do not reach it,  
Into something else, which, hardly sensing it, we already are;  
A gesture waves us on, answering our own wave. . .  
But what we feel is the wind in our faces.

– Rainer Maria Rilke, "A Walk"

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