Little Stones

A favourite book for me and my 4 year old grandson Rylan is: A Hole Is To Dig: A first book of first definitions. Part of the book's charm and wit are its epistemological puns, that define concepts in a way that captures a young person's ontology. In any event Rylan takes it very serious, and we both enjoy reading it together, and he now has a very clear understanding as to what a hole is all about. Once he arrived home to see me digging a large trench. Bursting with curiosity, he jumped out of his Mother’s car, ran down the driveway, stood on the edge of the trench, peered down into it and, obviously very impressed, looked up at me and said, “Cor! That's a big hole, Granddad!”.

Dr Ananda in his recent visit to New Zealand, here to lead a weekend retreat, told us that the World Health Organization were once again considering incorporating spirituality into their definition of health. In the 1940s the prevailing definition of health was an absence of disease and infirmity, but WHO at its conception raised the bar by changing this to the more embracing, “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being”. Sadly including spirituality into the WHO definition has been a long drawn-out affair, starting in 1983, dragging on to 1999, and eventually dropped as too hard for 15 years; until now when committee after committee labours over its definition.

I can imagine the same committee struggling with the definition of a hole. A hole possibly like many things, seems easier to define by what it’s not. For example I can stand in a hole in my gumboots, but though this shows a characteristic of a sufficiently large hole, that isn’t what a hole is. If we carry an empty flower pot, we could say we are carrying a hole, but otherwise as far as I know to date we can’t carry a hole by itself; though you should see Rylan, with a little encouragement, he finds it a lot of fun to try.

Trying to dissect spirituality is probably like trying to dissect a hole. Many people bandy the term around without thought, probably not meaning to be mystical and often really meaning something else. Whatever, they gayfully carry their spirituality around with them, rather as Rylan smiles when he cups his hands and arms to carry a hole. Some might say this is not spirituality, it’s just people full of fun and joy, but then who wouldn’t say being in good spirits is an integral part of wellness, especially if you compare it to someone experiencing, say, road rage? Possibly we can only define spirituality in terms of what it isn’t? The WHO committee considering spirituality could learn from yogis and students of Vedantic philosophy, who are well familiar with the Sanskrit term neti neti, which can be translated as not this, not that. Meanwhile I'm grateful to Dr Ananda for giving me a definition I can run with for now – “spirituality is being connected to the universe”.

Of course, as a recent commentator on the WHO affair noted, the connection between spirituality and health is really nothing new. Plato said, "the part can never be well unless the whole is well." The Yoga Vasistha is around a 1000 years old and it begins with the story of the kaktaliya, where a crow alights on the coconut palm tree and at that very moment a ripe coconut falls. The two unrelated events thus seem to be related in time and space, though there is no causal connection. And so the whole book goes, with story after story offering its seemingly complex Vedantic philosophy wrapped in a simple message: it is but our own ignorance, an illusion, to see ourselves as beings separate from cosmic consciousness, as there is no such duality.

Young Rylan needs to see no purpose or cause for a hole, or equally, he feels the potential and need for digging a hole for its own sake. Perhaps we should be less concerned with reifying and dissecting spirituality as simply feeling it. However words are all we have to express whatever it is, and some might say spirituality is a God-given gift; others the wind or sun on your face or the earth beneath your feet; a beating heart, the awe and wonder of birth; being in the flow as you move through yoga vinyasa or cycle up a hill or twirl in a dance; marvelling at how light travels at a constant speed and in a vacuum; or meditating, in a state of cosmic consciousness. We might never agree on the words but finally it is a feeling or experience of being connected
to something outside of the small thing we call 'I'. To paraphrase Rylan and Dr Ananda we might say, “Cor! Isn’t it divine!”.

Rylan’s ontology also cares little for cause and effect, but then for some of his behaviours the effect is such that his parents give him time-out. Being his GrandFather I have the luxury of having no real responsibility for that aspect of his development, but I did recognize that Rylan was ready for first concepts, when I began to see little piles of little stones appearing in various parts of the garden. This caused me to recall one of the famous concepts in the aforementioned book: *Little stones are for little children to gather into little piles*. When Rylan read this with me for the first time he looked up at me, not flinching an eyelid. Apparently self-evident to him, he seemed to say, what else could little stones be for? What does raise his eyebrows, repeatedly, is *Eyebrows are to go over your eyes*. Indeed anything to do with a face gets a reaction. The first time he read *A face is something to have on the front of your head*, brought a sudden understanding and a wise nodding of his head, and every time he reads *A face is so you can make faces*, starts off a game, to see who can pull the best face, which he always wins.

Eric our Classic Yoga teacher though he rarely pulls faces these days is fond of concepts, which he feeds to his students, so that every month he gives us ‘words of power’ to contemplate over the course of the month. One of this month's words is *coincidence*. One meaning suggested by Eric is “two or more things simultaneously occurring in the right place at the right time”. This got me thinking of something Dr Ananda said at the weekend retreat at Tatum Park in April 2014, near Levin in New Zealand: “It was a miracle that we were all meeting together at that place at that time.”.

I’d suggest Dr Ananda wasn’t talking about any such bothers as remembering to get a working visa to visit New Zealand, but rather in the much wider sense: it was a divine coincidence that we all made it there right then. It is mind-boggling to think not only of the big bang, but the many generations since the big bang who’d procreated and had, coincidentally, and seemingly unknowingly, played a very big part in us all being at Tatum Park; though as Eric says, “to a true yogi nothing is a surprise”, and Rylan might see it as akin to picking up seemingly randomly placed small stones and neatly placing them in one place.

Comparable to Rylan’s inner drive to organize and classify, Eric perceives harmony to be an important element of coincidence. This is an interesting thought as coincidentally at the same time as our Yoga group were at Tatum Park so too was a young female softball team. It seems the Tatum Park proprietor views yoga as a sport, and so for him to have two ‘sports groups’ staying together at the same time was natural. However for us yogis to share a retreat with partying, meat eating, often alcohol infused young women and their male admirers, and their anxious watchdog parents; and no doubt as it were for the softball group: to share a retreat with mostly older, often strangely dressed, vegetarian, hugging, happy chanting early-to-bed and early-risers who made tiger and donkey noises; wasn’t on paper really ever going to be harmonious. For our part, to be good yogis, and wrestling with our karma, we viewed it as no more than a practical test and application of Patanjali’s yamas and niyamas, and thus an aid to our spiritual development; while the young sports people for their part, to be good sports people, focused on playing their tournament hard, partying hard and sleeping late. And so both groups got on if not harmoniously then at least famously, mostly by avoiding each other as much as practicable.

Einstein said, “Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous”. I’m sure most people in the group at the 2014 Tatum Park yoga retreat would agree it was a very special event, even divine. For many of us it was a reunion, meeting up with old yoga friends, maintaining relationships. There were new faces who brought their unique contribution, joining our yoga family. Each time we meet up with Dr Ananda we see a deeper practical synthesis between yoga knowledge from his lineage, and medical knowledge from his formal training. He makes it relevant to us with his wise and insightful talks, and all the more meaningful because of his self-effacing good humour, fun and laughter. Sadly it was all too soon before we all departed from the yoga retreat and, rather like Rylan’s little piles of little stones, we were once more scattered back on our various paths.