

## 'IDEALISM IN ACTION' CONFERENCE

Christ College of Trans-Himalayan Wisdom, Christchurch, New Zealand

6 - 8 October 2007

The city of Christchurch on the South Island of New Zealand is the departure point for flights to Antarctica. As this year is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of Scott Base, there is more reason to be aware of New Zealand's connections with the polar ice. On the banks of the river Avon in the middle of Christchurch there is a memorial to Robert Falcon Scott who with four other members of his party, died on the way back from the South Pole in 1912, just 11 miles away from the base camp that was their intended destination. The plaque bears this quote from Scott:

'I do not regret this journey which shows that Englishmen can endure hardships help one another and meet death with as great fortitude as ever in the past.'

These brave adventurers to the south pole exemplify idealism in action! How appropriate then that this was the theme of this year's conference organised by Christ College of Trans-Himalayan Wisdom in Christchurch.

Of course there are many ways to put idealism into action and fortunately they don't all involve experiencing such extreme physical conditions as exist in Antarctica. The conference drew a variety of 'idealists' together from many disciplines, specialisations and backgrounds. One of the talks I found most inspiring was Nicky Hager speaking on 'Power and Politics'. Nicky has put solid effort for many years into political activism on many of the big issues in New Zealand, notably the anti-nuclear campaign and saving the native forests from logging. He is an investigative journalist and has written several books exposing the power dynamics and economics behind politics, intelligence networks and environmental issues. But the thing is, he seems like such a reasonable and peace-loving sort of bloke! So what are his motivations for working within the 'hard and brutal' world of politics? He gives three reasons: Because if no-one did anything about it the structures of power and politics which take away people's choices would remain unchanged. Because many of us in New Zealand have privileged backgrounds and therefore carry greater responsibility for making the world a better place. And because he knows that he can make a difference! This is optimism based upon experience. Nicky believes that there is among the public a latent goodwill based upon common human values. It is not that people don't care, they just don't know about the issues and don't know what to do about them. Also there is an inertia factor to be overcome, which is our sense of disillusion and hopelessness about political change. It is necessary to put out enough effort, energy and information to overcome this inertia. Ah it makes you want to get out there and act like a catalyst!

Sheldon Hughes and Halina Bak-Hughes through their firm Capricorn Consulting Group based out of San Francisco, work to build a soul-based culture in the world of business. Their talk 'The Great Turning' takes its title from Joanna Macy's description of the global values shift from 'domination' to 'partnership'—a transition from industrial expansionism to life-sustaining civilization. We are right now in the 'chrysalis' stage (metaphorically) when what was a caterpillar has dissolved into a kind of genetic

soup before being reconstituted into a butterfly! But signs of our coming butterfly self are already here. Halina and Sheldon are great synthesisers. They present a tantalising peek at a wide range of people, ideas and practices in many fields of endeavour that evidence this Great Turning. For instance architect and designer William McDonough whose primary design principle is to ‘love all of the children of all of the species for all time’. Psychologist Martin Seligman who began teaching college psychology courses based on optimism, love, forgiveness, gratitude and compassion. Bishop Swing who established the United Religions Collective. Economist Richard Layard who proposed an economy based upon the measurement of happiness and well-being. Richard Barrett whose ‘full spectrum leadership’ model adds a hierarchy of values above Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Last but certainly not least, Paul Hawken who has gathered together a staggeringly vast list of grassroots organisations all over the world concerned with the environment, indigenous culture and social justice—a global movement that has no orthodoxy, no central organisation or ideology, is not confined to any section or class of society, is off the radar of the media and yet shares a common understanding. This is so heartening! It is tangible evidence of transformation for all of us on the cusp of the Aquarian Age.

My association between ‘idealism in action’ and Antarctica is partly inspired by the work of artist and poet Claire Beynon, who actually did travel to the polar ice. In her talk on ‘Soul Based Creativity’ she described her trip to Antarctica during October and November 2005 accompanying a scientific research team as part of a collaborative, interdisciplinary project between science and art. Claire suggests that our planetary environmental crisis should lead us to a re-examination of our creativity. It is time we ‘went forward to nature’ rather than ‘back to nature’. Art is less about the creation of objects as it is about the process of change. She defines ‘culture’ as taking responsibility to improve the world we have been given—the transformation of marble into sculpture, cat-gut into a violin, mouldy bread into penicillin, or cocoa pods into chocolate. :) Claire writes, paints, draws and creates installations. She trusts the process, follows her intuition and is often surprised by synchronicities. One of the most delightful of her works is a series of photographs of a spoon and fork posed in the arctic landscape. How human they look. Later she found out that these two implements were the only ones supplied in the base camp food kits—no knives. In Antarctica she lay on the ice listening to the sounds it makes. In her paintings and drawings of the landscape scale seems to shift, and the marks of the brush or charcoal express a large organisation and flow like notations of some more encompassing harmonic whole.

In his opening address to the conference Michael Robbins reminded us that ideals begin in the realm of divine Ideas. Our whole planet is the precipitation of a divine Idea! Here at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are we open to the great impelling Ideas that are trying to guide human evolution? For instance the idea of Peace, or Right Relationship or Interdependence (we are One world). This is how the divine Plan unfolds: It is up to us to manifest these guiding ideas by bringing them down into practical ideals and releasing ourselves from any distortions surrounding them.

I enjoyed Lawson Bracewell’s description of himself as an idealistic young American arriving in New Zealand in 1978 with long hair, beads and rainbow clothes. Walking down Queen Street in Auckland he noticed how people reacted to his appearance. This was perhaps his first introduction to the ideals of New Zealand society and

culture. It was mainly Maori people who responded to him with a kind of delight. We have a sliding scale of ideals. Any ideal can be put into practice well or badly. At this time in Earth history which end of the wand of idealism will we choose? Or will we learn to marry all the vitality and momentum of desire with a higher vision?

Helen Palmer told us a bit about her experience manifesting an ideal—the founding of the Institute of Psychosynthesis NZ in Auckland. And she gave us some very useful advice about the psychological challenges of grounding a vision: How important it is to remain conscious of any difficult feelings so that we can access our full emotional potential and transform the negatives into positive practical action. To learn not to take the projections of others personally. To recognise our own ego defences and those of others. To free ourselves from polarised thinking. To create an inner sense of spaciousness so that we can tolerate uncertainty and anxiety. Hmm if psychosynthesis can help out with all of these, maybe we could all learn more about it. : )

There were so many wonderful talks. The Reverend Maurice Gray spoke about the Ageless Wisdom of the Maori and the way that the language and waiata (songs) of the people, and the stories of the gods, provide indicators of our pathway towards a fusion of the spiritual and physical worlds. Daryl Fell described the process of his group manifesting the ideal in the form of a book that is a practical guide to astrology. Dick Tayler, who won a Commonwealth Gold medal for the 10,000 metres race in Christchurch in 1974, spoke about how he achieved his goal. We had cosmobiologist Dr Andy Pratt describing the quest of the scientist to discover the origin of life. He studies the intersection between inorganic and organic chemistry to discover how the very first biological cells might have developed. Currently the focus is on the hydrothermal vent systems way way down under the ocean where the tectonic plates of the Earth meet. There is no sunlight or oxygen down there but a lot of heat, and just metres away from such vents there is a luxuriance of life.

As well as all these talks there were many workshops that one had to choose between! Scheduled into the daily programme was a time for group discussion, which gave us all the opportunity to begin to process and ground what we had learned, and created a space for response and networking with other participants.— Perfect for bringing our idealism into action! And as well as this there were morning meditations, a beautiful group ritual, ceremonies and an evening concert. Well you know, Christchurch may be about a 5 hour flight from Antarctica but how far wouldn't you travel to enjoy a conference like this? It was delightful to see a few of our friends from America, and quite a few from across the Tasman, as well as those of us from New Zealand . Perhaps the kiwis were a little scarce on the ground? So friends, now that you know about this conference, it happens every two years so I heartily welcome you to come along in October 2009 from wherever you are in the world! You won't regret the journey.

Barbara Maré