

Tim James' Account of 'THE ORIGINAL VISION,' by Edward Robinson, and reflections arising from it.

When I read a new book it usually happens because my interest is kindled by another source of information, a friend, another book, an article so let's look at what John H Westerhoff, 111 says in his forward to the American edition of 'The Original Vision' by Edward Robinson –

'You are about to read a rare book. If you care about religious education it may be among the most important you will ever read.' – this from a Professor of Religious Education at Duke University Divinity School.

In his forward to the first edition Sir Alistair Hardy says –

'This book provides the material for making the spiritual side of man real and vital... It does not deal with the religion of institutions or of theologies, but with the fundamental part of man's nature, which is especially revealed in the imaginative vision of the young'.

In this brief time I hope to distil enough of the evidence, conclusions and hence beliefs presented by Edward Robinson in 'The Original Vision' to facilitate, even provoke, your own thoughts, a recollection of your own experience, in a way that will help us all to enter into a fuller understanding of –

- our own spirituality
- where our personal resilience comes from
- how to recognise the spirituality and resilience of others
- how to engage with others at a deeper level.

-and also to read this book because, as the author has said informally, 'What I have to say is not important – read the stories. They are important.'

Edward Robinson, after a career in education, latterly in the Colonial Service in Africa joined the Religious Experience Research Unit at Manchester College, Oxford. Later, he succeeded Sir Alistair Hardy as its Director. Alistair Hardy in his Gifford Lectures in 1963 challenged his fellow scientists to take seriously the fact of religious experience as a central feature of human life, founded the unit and through its activities collected over 4,000 first hand accounts of significant experience. Of these 15% described childhood experience as an important component and were asked to respond to a questionnaire designed to enlarge on that experience and clarify its impact on other aspects of their behaviour and life's story. 282 responses were received – these form the basis of the conclusions that Edward Robinson describes in this book.

Those teachers amongst us particularly will be aware of the huge contribution made to educational psychology by Piaget. Whilst recognising this Edward Robinson challenges the implied attitude in Piaget's approach that the child is an imperfect adult to be bought from childhood incompetence to the adult ability to give correct solutions. Rather he sees the child as forming its own nature with capacity for insight and understanding that has been underrated by the developmental psychologists. He also points out that the ability to express in words the nature of an experience often

comes later than the experience itself. It may well be that for many the experiences are had but the ability to even begin to convey them never develops.

I think from my childhood I have always had the feeling that the true reality is not to be found in the world, as the average person sees it. There seems to be a constant force at work from the inside trying to push its way to the surface of consciousness, The mind is continually trying to create a symbol sufficiently comprehensive to contain it, but this always ends in failure. There are moments of pure joy with a heightened awareness of one's surroundings, as if a great truth had been passed across.....At times it feels that the physical brain is not big enough to let it through.[M42]

Vision, mysticism and reality are potent words often used in widely varying ways when a discussion of significant experience is in the offing. A definition of mystical experience offered by William James in his book 'The Varieties of Religious Experience' is recommended – 'They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for aftertime.'

This intensity of such experience is often felt in the context of the environment and is labelled as 'Nature Mysticism'

The first approach to a spiritual experience which I can remember must have taken place when I was five or six years old at the house where I was born and brought up. It was a calm, limpid summer morning and the early mist still lay in wispy wreaths among the valleys. The dew on the grass seemed to sparkle like iridescent jewels in the sunlight, and the shadows of the house and trees seemed friendly and protective, In the heart of the child that I was there suddenly seemed to well up a deep and overwhelming sense of gratitude, a sense of unending peace and security which seemed to be part of the beauty of the morning, the love and protective and living presence which included all that I had ever loved and yet was something much more.[M 63]

This co-incides with Wordsworth's experience as expressed in his well known Ode:

-We will grieve not;
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass,
Of glory in the flower,
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be.

Here we see the transcendent quality that is the first characteristic of the significant experience that is a common theme in the majority of the responses to the questionnaire. This is to be seen as having the quality of 'something-more'. It is not related to institutional religion or even a specific Faith. It has its own special reality

that is completely individual. It is self authenticating and therefore has a particular authority in the context of the life of the individual. It confers a sense of right that is later rationalised at an intellectual level. So here again, Edward Robinson offers the insight that, rather than becoming moral by example only, the capacity that a child has to see the reality of life gives a form, an awareness, against which future example and experience is tested.

The second characteristic of significant experience that emerges from the questionnaires is that it has an ongoing effect, a continuing influence in the individual's life. This may take on the form of requiring a response.

After the experience of the sense of presence I knew, as Walt Whitman expressed it, that there was more to me than was found between my hat and my shoes. It was up to me to find out more about that More; and so, as I see it, my miniscule will was linked up with the will that our forefathers called God. I do n't know what that power is, nor do I call it God. But by it I live and in my slow, often frustrated effort to learn means of communication with it I grow, inch by inch, into a person more resembling a human being than was ever imagined by me to be possible. This power beyond my own ego is not altogether beyond it or separate from it. It is as personal and 'of me' as the colour of my eyes, is friendly and reliable, resourceful and companionable. But on the far side of me it is a mystery with respect to which I put my hand on my mouth. [F 73]

The home, family and 'Church God' are all mentioned in the responses sometimes with positive, sometimes negative effects – constructive and destructive. Of these a startling number of stories mention how adults failed to recognise the realism and depth of understanding in the children involved and hence behaved entirely inappropriately thus diminishing their capacity to influence and support because they were perceived as out of touch. In some of these examples this amounted to an inability or unwillingness to be real bordering on dishonesty that then came into conflict with a developed, though not overt, sense of right in the child. This was particularly so in the way that adults managed situations involving the death of a close relative. Edward Robinson points out that unless we accept the possibility that this depth of understanding may exist in a child's experience we will, more often than not, fail to recognise and therefore fail to engage with the reality of that child's nature.

In summary he states the position he has arrived at having absorbed the significance of these experiences and states it as his belief that-

- an original vision of childhood is a form of knowledge
- is mystical, transcendent, something-more though not usually the peak experience often associated with these terms
- understood over a period of time
- self authenticating – needing no confirmation or sanction from any other source, bringing an awareness of self with an identity, freedom and responsibilities of its own
- understood in purposive terms, having consequence, creating destiny.

The final paragraph of the book completes his insight drawing on quotations used earlier in the book. -

‘The great majority of those whose experience led me to make this study are men and women in whom the original vision of childhood has never wholly faded.’ ‘If the child within me dies a little more each day,’ [asks Marcel] ‘how am I to be faithful to myself? And when I cannot do this, I am no longer there, I do not exist any more.’ In Brancusi’s words, ‘When we cease to be children, we are already dead.’ But if childhood, in the wider timeless sense is in some mysterious fashion connected, or even identified with, that kind of awareness that is truly to be called religious, it could be that by learning once more to respond to the demands made upon us by the something-more-than situation we may discover that there is still a spark of life in the child within each one of us.’

Over forty years practising medicine I have gradually become aware that there are people who have a significant resilience to the stress created by life-changing events. This has become clearer in the last thirty years working within the same community. They appear to be able to accept, cope with and develop through these experiences in a way that leaves them stronger, more able people; able in the context of their own lives but also in their capacity and willingness to engage with others. Nor does this ability appear to be explained by their good fortune in avoiding the wide range of recognised social and psychological factors that are known to make an individual prone to destructive behaviours. My sense is that an undefined force is acting here that does not attract the attention of those whose main purpose is to provide care and support to those who need it, often desperately, where recognised, known factors are already all too evident. Reading this book, considering its insights leads me to ask the question is this resilience related to a childhood spirituality that continues to be a fundamental driving force in an individual’s life?

New perceptions make one open to seeing similar awareness in other sources. In her Earthsea Trilogy Ursula Le Guin describes Ogion the mage or master magician saying to Ged the apprentice magician-
‘A man would know the end he goes to, but he cannot know it if he does not turn, and return to the beginning, and hold that beginning in his being. If he would not be a stick whirled and whelmed in a stream, he must be the stream himself, all of it, from its spring to its sinking in the sea.’

T S Eliot opens the last stanza of ‘Little Gidding’ with –
‘We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive at where we started
And know the place for the first time.’

So to return to our beginnings today, has an account of ‘The Original Vision’ enlarged our understanding of our own spirituality? Do we understand better where our own resilience comes from? Will we recognise more the spirituality of others and in so doing enhance their resilience? Will we engage with the leavening influence of these significant experiences and be enabled to relate to one another at a deeper level?