

Chapter Twenty-Four

‘SWITCHING’ WITH A VENGEANCE

Friday 5th May

Carindale

‘So, what time will she be here tomorrow?’ asked Mary during their evening meal.

‘Two o’clock. Same as Kevin,’ answered James.

Mary looked up. ‘What about Julie?’

He shook his head. ‘She couldn’t find a baby sitter at such short notice, unfortunately.’

‘Oh, what a pity.’ She said, a little too quickly.

The thought flashed through his mind that she didn’t seem too sorry. For some reason, he realised, Mary didn’t like Julie but he was surprised to find himself more than a little disappointed that she couldn’t come. He didn’t see any connection between the two ideas.

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Saturday 6th May

‘Come in Stephanie,’ Mary heard James say and hurried into the lounge and to join Kevin and her husband. ‘Mary, Kevin, I’d like to introduce Stephanie Edie, I mean Preston.’ James faltered.

Stephanie wagged a finger at James. ‘Stephanie will be fine thanks James.’

‘How do you do Stephanie,’ said Mary inclining her head. ‘I’m Mary, James’ better half.’

'Hey, that's my line,' objected James with a laugh.

'Mary,' acknowledged Stephanie politely with a slight bow.

Kevin moved forward eagerly in case she offered her hand, which she did. 'I'm delighted to meet you Stephanie. I'm Kevin, and I enjoy your programme too.'

'Thank you for that Kevin and I'm very pleased to meet you as well.' Stephanie said graciously and then looked around. 'James, I thought there were four of you?'

'Oh, sorry,' interceded Kevin. 'My wife, Julie, had to stay with the children. James sprang this on us rather quickly and we couldn't get a baby-sitter. She wanted me to baby-sit so she could come, but I wasn't going to miss this afternoon for love nor money.'

Stephanie laughed. 'I hope you're not expecting too much of me. You might be disappointed.'

'I doubt that very much,' said James as he indicated the chairs in the lounge. 'Have a seat everyone and we'll get started.' As soon as they were all settled with glasses of water on the occasional table in the centre, he spread his hands. 'Well, folks, I don't have any set plan for today, except to pick Stephanie's brains.' He looked sideways at Stephanie. 'Stephanie, would you like to start off?'

'Thank you James but I don't have anything prepared either. You said this was your support group and I was just a resource person.' She looked at James with one eyebrow raised quizzically. Then she relented. 'Alright, let me put forward my meagre credentials for being a resource person. In the last few months I've learned a lot about Buddhism. I can't say I've experienced 'enlightenment' as yet - but, a few years ago, I had what you might call a mystical experience.'

James waved an encouraging hand. 'Please...tell us about it.'

Stephanie nodded briefly and leant forward. 'Well, I was sitting on the bank of Lake Manchester, enjoying the scenery when I seemed to lose my self. There was no

separation between me and the world around me. For a moment I was at one with the universe.'

She stopped speaking and Kevin cocked an eyebrow at James. 'Would you call that 'Nature Mysticism' James?'

James nodded. 'That's one name for it. Another would be an 'Extrovertive' mystical experience - mysticism with the eyes open. But it's your experience, Stephanie. What would you say?'

'I'd prefer 'Nature Mysticism' I think but,' she raised one hand palm upwards. 'A rose by any other name?'' They all laughed. 'However, I've also been brought up in the Anglican Church and done post-graduate work in Comparative Religion. Now tell me about your group. How did it start?'

Kevin confessed that it was his idea. He had wanted to give James a chance to bounce his ideas off someone and to sharpen up his theories against opposition.

'I'm sure you've been a great help to him.' Stephanie turned to James. 'Now could someone fill me in on this paradigm theory?'

'The Dual Paradigm Theory,' said Kevin proudly. 'That name was a joint effort. Can I do the honours James?'

'Be my guest,' said James with his hands spread.

After Kevin had explained the title and his reasons for choosing it, Stephanie asked, 'Well, if both world-views are only assumptions or paradigms, how does the 'Dual Paradigm Theory' affect you in practice?'

Kevin testified to the effect on himself. 'It's made a big difference to my religious beliefs. Once I accepted this theory, I could no longer be dogmatic and think of my experience of a personal God as the only understanding. I now realise that our interpretations are distorted by our world-view.'

Stephanie asked. 'And what do you say our world-view is?'

Kevin answered. 'Well, the western, 'linear' time paradigm.'

Stephanie extended one hand towards Kevin. 'Doesn't this mean your theistic understanding is less valid than you thought?'

'No, I don't believe that at all.' Kevin sat up defiantly but then relented a little. 'I agree it was a bit of a shock for me to find that the theistic view of God wasn't the only valid understanding. But it's still valid - from its own vantage point in time. Right James?'

'Right.' James leant forward in his chair and looked at Stephanie, 'I think that both understandings can be totally satisfying within their own time frameworks.'

'So, if your world-view is only an assumption and may not give you the absolute truth, what advantage is there?' asked Stephanie.

James took a sip of his glass and then lifted one finger. 'How about...the advantage of widening your horizons - the thrill of knowing that your beloved convictions are now part of a wider truth.'

'That mightn't be such a thrill for some people.' Mary threw in.

'Probably not, Mary.' Kevin pointed at her. 'But it would do them good to 'go boldly where no one has gone before', In deference to Stephanie he dropped the sexist form of the Star Trek theme.

'So you're a Star Trek fan?' asked Stephanie with a smile.

'Of course.' Kevin spread his hands. 'Isn't everyone?'

'I don't think so,' laughed Stephanie as she took a drink.

James stood up and topped up their glasses.

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Kevin paused with his glass in midair as a thought struck him. 'Speaking of going boldly to other planets, that makes me think of another advantage of our theory

- the ability to be more open to truths in other cultures and other religions. In fact I think it would be a prerequisite for any successful Inter-Faith dialogue.'

Stephanie raised her eyebrows at Kevin. 'I agree, but that applies to the other partner in the dialogue as well. I have interviewed people who see no truth in any religion but their own.'

She looked back at James. 'Does your Dual Paradigm Theory have any other benefits?'

James realised that Stephanie was leading the group and doing it well. He answered, 'Christians who seek the 'light from the East' as they say won't have to give up their own way of being religious.'

'Yes, I understand what you're saying,' Stephanie nodded knowingly. 'Lots of people become fascinated with the mystical insights of the Eastern religions thinking they might be better than their own. I've been guilty of that. But do you really think it's necessary for everyone to try and mix their world-views?'

'Maybe not everyone.' James looked up to the ceiling as he pondered. 'But it would be good thing for the sick and elderly to believe they are 'essentially' one with God and with all creation - including all creatures.'

'Yes,' agreed Kevin. 'Not only the sick and elderly but also the disabled. They can't easily join in the life of the world and have the satisfaction of achievement.'

'That's very true,' Stephanie looked wistful. 'I'm thinking of my mother in a Nursing Home.'

That made Kevin remember his pastoral work. 'Well, as I visit people like your mother, I find they are interested in ideas of mystical unity with the Divine or with Nature. It's more relevant to them. They feel they can't do much to reform the world any more.'

‘That’s right,’ said James. ‘The idea of ‘being’ is more relevant for them than the idea of ‘becoming’.’

Kevin continued with more examples. ‘And people in refugee camps, prisoners against their will, anyone who is powerless to change their future or do anything except fall deeper into despair. Surely Stephanie, a belief in the unity of all things will add a new dimension to any theist’s life.’

‘And,’ added James as Stephanie nodded, ‘those people are finding that it is possible to meditate in solitude even as they used to worship in the church community. A writer called Yandell says that you can’t ‘worship with Isaiah in the temple and meditate with Shankara in the grove’ but I don’t agree.’¹

Stephanie looked quickly at him. ‘And I hope to disprove it too, don’t I James.’

He smiled at Stephanie’s personal disclosure. Apparently she and her husband had come to a decision. ‘But you might have difficulty reconciling your experiences. Yandell says that either you start to personalise the Absolute or you de-personalise God.’¹

‘Then again, maybe your ‘Dual Paradigm’ Theory will help us keep the two understandings in balance.’ Stephanie inclined her head with a gentle smile.

James acknowledged the compliment with a slight bow.

After taking a sip Stephanie continued, ‘It seems to me that accepting your theory would also increase tolerance for the other world-view.’

‘I would hope so. Those who adopt the ‘Dual Paradigm’ Theory won’t be able to think badly of the mystical strands in world religions or in the New Age movement.’ James looked at Kevin. ‘It would involve a real ‘paradigm shift’ for those who thought that theirs was the only truth.’

‘What if a church member is so fascinated by the ‘light from the East’ that they actually want to try it out?’ asked Stephanie, drawing them out.

‘No problem.’ James spread his hands. ‘You can’t blame people wanting to have a first hand experience of becoming one with the universe, but now they don’t have to deny the validity of their original theistic experience, if they had one.’

Stephanie narrowed her eyes. ‘And if they haven’t had any kind of satisfactory personal experience in their own tradition?’

James shrugged. ‘Then, if they find what they’re seeking, they may not come back.’ He lifted a finger. ‘But, if they think that Mysticism is the only way to have an experience of the transcendent, they’re mistaken. It’s the same Ultimate Reality they could have found in their own church.’

‘But less personal?’

‘Yes, a different aspect.’

Stephanie put her hand to her chin. ‘And if they don’t want to?’

‘Then, hopefully, the Theory will make them less inclined to regard time and history as illusory.’

Stephanie frowned sceptically. ‘Have any of you ever come across anyone who’s had both experiences?’

‘I have.’ Kevin offered, glad to be back in the conversation. ‘I know of one young man who attained enlightenment overseas in the mystical setting and then came back to have an experience of the personal God in the worship setting at home.’

‘Also, Stephanie.’ James reached out one hand. ‘Many of the mystical writers I have been studying have had both experiences.’

Stephanie nodded. ‘And what about the New Age movement?’

He replied. ‘I believe that the core of the so called ‘New Age’ movement is old fashioned Eastern mysticism.’

‘Yes’, said Stephanie. ‘I believe that’s where they get their interest in cosmic unity and the preservation of nature. So how would your theory affect the New Age proponents?’

James blew out his cheeks. ‘Well, it might modify some negative and hostile views towards traditional worship.’

‘And it might not,’ objected Kevin leaning forward. ‘Once people have had any kind of spiritual experience, they tend to have the fanaticism of the convert, at least for a while.’

Stephanie smiled at Kevin’s realistic view of human nature. ‘OK. Now, how can we live with the two world-views?’

Kevin realised how much he was enjoying the company and the leadership of this charming lady. He answered, ‘We have a technique for switching back and forth.’

Mary glanced teasingly at James, ‘But we can’t explain the technique. We can only give examples of how we apply it.’

‘Well then, let’s hear some examples.’ Stephanie picked up her glass and drained it.

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After refilling glasses and handing round nibblies, James and Kevin quickly ran through a couple of the examples they had worked out earlier - theistic versus mystical interpretations of Creation and about life after death. Stephanie listened intently using her interviewing skills to bring out all the finer points. Then she asked, ‘I think I’m catching on to the ‘switching’ technique. It’s quite a mind game isn’t it?’

‘I call it mental gymnastics,’ said Kevin. ‘It’s the closest I’ll ever get to doing gymnastics.’

Stephanie acknowledged the comment with a smile and asked, ‘Could you apply your technique to anything thrown at you?’

Kevin sat forward and lifted an eyebrow. 'What did you have in mind?'

Stephanie pondered the question. The previous evening, she and her husband had had the best time of communication and sharing that they had had for a long time, and she had James to thank for that. One of the issues Peter had raised was the question of the mystics' realisation of their own divinity, which he had obviously discussed with James. So she said, 'The mystics' claim to be divine.' In that subtle way, she let James know that she and Peter had talked last night. Mary's eyes flicked from Stephanie to James as she realised what was going on.

'That's a good one.' James responded. 'The boss and I were discussing that one the other day.' Bingo. Message received. 'But we didn't compare the divine status of mystics with the divine status of theists.'

'Theists are divine?' objected Kevin in horror.

'Yes, in a sense, but bear with me,' replied James. 'There's a real conflict here that needs to be resolved before we can reconcile the two world-views. On the one hand, some mystics of the negative way say they have attained total undifferentiated unity with Ultimate Reality. On the other hand, our Western theologians usually can't accept that anyone could possibly be totally one with almighty God - even in heaven after death or in 'the age to come'. So the two beliefs appear at first sight to be diametrically opposed.'

'So, are we going to apply the 'reflection' model?' asked Mary.

He winked at Mary and then looked at Stephanie. 'Stephanie, whenever we come across conflicting views, we apply our reflection model.'

Stephanie lifted a hand to forestall an unnecessary explanation. 'I know. I read your article on that. You assume both views are partly right and look for the reality reflected by each. Correct?'

James was chuffed that she had remembered the article. 'Exactly, and we also accept that both views are partly mistaken. So let's try and work this through together. Firstly, what about mystics who claim they've become divine during their mystical 'trance'.'

Stephanie responded. 'Well, as you apparently said to Peter, they shouldn't assume that that state continues after they've 'come out of' their mystical trance.'

'That's right. They shouldn't.' James agreed. 'Take al-Hallaj for example. He's the mystic who said, 'I am Truth', and was crucified for blasphemy. Had he said something like, 'While I was at the height of my mystical trance, I had an experience of being one with the divine', or words to that effect, he may not have been crucified.'

Kevin the realist demurred. 'Then again he may have been.'

'And what about the Western theologians?' asked Stephanie.

Kevin answered. 'Well, in the Christian tradition, the idea of being united to the Divine isn't totally heretical. Christians hope to become one with Christ and share in his divine nature after death.'

Stephanie backed that up. 'And the Eastern Orthodox Church seems to believe quite firmly in deification.'

Kevin was pleased by her support for his opinion. 'Right.'

'But,' objected Stephanie, 'the two positions are still not reconciled.'

'Not yet.' James raised a finger. 'So, let's try 'switching'. In 'linear' time we agree that Christians do actually have a future, glorified - and maybe deified - state? In 'vertical' time the mystics say that this future, deified state is already deep within us and that we are 'potentially' one with Ultimate Reality. How does that sound?'

'I'm not sure.' Stephanie looked upward as she considered the question. 'So the present inward state of the mystic corresponds to the future deified state of the theist?'

James accepted that interpretation. 'Sounds right to me. You're really starting to 'switch' Steph.'

Kevin leant forward and pretended to examine Stephanie's eye. 'If it worries you Stephanie, I have some ointment that might help.'

'I said 'switch' not 'twitch' Kevin,' James said with mock severity. 'Don't take any notice of him Stephanie. He finds it hard to be serious.'

'You're very lucky that he does,' laughed Stephanie. 'This sort of discussion needs some light relief from time to time.'

'And also some light refreshment,' interrupted Mary, rising. 'I think we had better stop now for afternoon tea. I don't know about the rest of you but my head's swimming.'

'Yes,' agreed Stephanie. 'I'd appreciate a break too. I think this is going to need all my concentration.'

'I agree. Oh boy,' exclaimed Kevin. 'This is switching with a vengeance.'

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1. K Yandell, Religious Experience and Rational Appraisal, Religious Studies 10, 1974, P. 173-4.