An inquiry into animism as a source of meaning in response to radical and disruptive non-ordinary experiences.

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This research project is dedicated to Hugo Bryant, aged two, and to others of his generation, who will, in their time, need to craft new ways of knowing.
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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

(Signature)
Table of Contents

Abstract v

Chapter One: Introduction and Methodology 1

The first profoundly disrupting encounter 2

Key Research Questions 6

How do I make sense of my experience of the non-ordinary? 6

Could I find a way of fitting my experiences within my parent culture’s ontological narrative? 7

Towards the development of a Methodology – a discussion of Ontological, Epistemological and Methodological issues. 7

The Ontological problem 9

Conflicting paradigms at the level of experience 12

The Epistemological problem 14

Methodology 18

Phenomenology and hermeneutics as a methodological approach 18

Hermeneutics, text and discourse analysis 23

Development of a methodological approach 25

Autoethnography 25

Application of Methodology 32

Personal experience 32

Literature 33

Chapter outlines 34
Chapter Two: Mounting evidence of something incomprehensible and how the dominant discourses of my culture’s ontology failed to offer explanation.

The WM Incident

Psychic attack

Intentional encounters with a willing participant

Reflecting on the various interpretive options open to me

Exploring the discourses

The religious options, and initial response

The science option, an initial response

Philosophy

Parapsychology – an early encounter

Other alternatives

Confrontation between the astonishing and the rational – the sense of ontological crisis

Looking further afield and later reflections on the religious and scientific discourses

Subsequent engagement with science

Shifting ground in psychiatry

An alternative view on hearing voices

From destructive doubt to a sense of possibility

Chapter Three: What is Animism and why has it apparently re-emerged as a knowledge system?

The ‘discovery’ of animism

Towards a definition of animism

Ghosts and spirits - the population of an animistic awareness

Dragons

The Politics of Experience

Animism as a means to articulate a response to experience.
Abstract

This is an autoethnographic inquiry into the experience of a series of deeply disruptive non-ordinary phenomena that caused me, initially, to question my sanity and to try to understand what was happening. I explore the drama of struggle to make sense of these experiences, dismissed by my culture’s dominant ontologies as invalid.

The research is centred around two key questions – “How do I make sense of my experience of the non-ordinary?” and “Could I find a way of fitting my experiences within my parent culture’s ontological narrative?”

I explore animism as a possible explanatory model. Animism has long been considered to be a ‘primitive’ perceptual and conceptual mode, essentially erroneous, from which humans evolve. However, recently, the idea has been rehabilitated to serve environmental concerns, though not in a highly disciplined manner.

I argue that animism is an innate form of perception and conception, with a complex foundation, and which merits reconsideration as a valid and valued way of knowing the world. There is yet considerable work to be done to develop animism as a mature contemporary discourse model.
Chapter One

Introduction and Methodology

This research applies an autoethnographic method to explore the consequences of a series of personal radical non-ordinary experiences that commenced in the early 1970s. The initial effects of these experiences were profoundly disruptive to my sense of self, and my sense of sanity. They eventually precipitated a deep ontological crisis as I attempted to discover their meaning within the dominant cultural narrative that did not appear to accommodate them.

The crisis led from unintentional to intentional non-ordinary experiences as the struggle to make sense evolved, over time, from the urgent and immediate personal drama to a more measured inquiry that sought to answer the questions posed by the experiences and their possible meaning in a progressively widening frame of thought.

The meaning we draw from experience is the substance of our sense of reality, and the narrative we create shapes that sense of reality into a shared, and bonding, or an isolating thing. So when my experiences reached a pitch of intensity, and a degree of strangeness, that went beyond my capacity to construct meaning I had to confront the prospect that I was going mad. What was happening was of vital, urgent, importance to me, but it was incomprehensible to others. I could see the risk of ostracism, and it was not I wanted. But what was happening was part of my reality, and I was not prepared to surrender it for acceptance. The struggle to make ‘good’ meaning has preoccupied my attention for many years. Many times this preoccupation has deeply disrupted my desire for a ‘normal’ life. Answers I hoped to be substantial have morphed into chimerical creatures of the mind.
This thesis carries on the process of inquiry, but within the rules of a formal research project. I have chosen an autoethnographic approach because the inquiry is rooted in personal experiences, and these experiences remain as a constant reference and a spur. To do otherwise would sever the inquiry from the energy that feeds it, and hence offer an artificial, and possibly misleading, context to the reader. I recount a few of the more radical experiences, ones seminal to my own reflections. I also give account, drawing on personal journals, of the personal journey of response and reflection as I struggle to discover the bedrock of meaning I believe to be somewhere beneath the forest of unsatisfactory and unsatisfying explanations.

**The first profoundly disrupting encounter**

The experiences commenced from about age four but reached a crescendo of destabilising intensity in my early 20s. Until that dangerous period of early adulthood what I experienced tended only to bemuse me, aside from some truly terrifying childhood experiences. Most of what I encountered seem to be useful, what one might call ‘psychic gifts’ that helped me find things. One of the early profoundly challenging ones occurred in the middle of 1972. I was living in a house occupied by students from the University of Melbourne. I was the only non-student. I had become friendly with ML, who had the front upstairs bedroom and we spent many hours in conversation when she should have been attending to her studies. On a particular evening she retreated to her room early to meet a looming deadline.

The next morning I encountered her in the kitchen. She did not look well rested and my immediate assumption was that she had stayed up late at her studies. The instant she saw me she launched into verbal attack. “I had been ignoring my friends.” “Why should they have to wake me up at two in the morning to ask me to get you to talk to them?” Words to this effect sprinkled liberally with expletives left me stunned. I had no idea what she was talking about. What few friends I had left in Melbourne I had seen recently and regularly. She was plainly distressed and when she calmed down enough I asked her to explain her conduct. This is what she told me.

She had studied until close on midnight and had then gone to bed and fallen asleep quickly. About two o’clock she was woken up by three people, two men and a woman, in her room. She was initially alarmed, thinking it might have been a police raid searching for drugs, but they quickly assured her that they were on a different mission. For some time, she thought perhaps about twenty minutes, she sat up in bed while they sat on chairs they had moved and placed closer to the bed. The
gist of their conversation, at least the only part she conveyed to me, was that they had been trying to talk to me and I had been ignoring them. Would she kindly speak to me and ask me to be more responsive to them. They then left and she went back to sleep more or less convinced that the incident had been a dream.

When she woke she was startled to notice that the chairs had been left as she presumed she had dreamed them. ML is a tidy person. She had placed the chairs against the wall and had neatly placed clothing on several of them. It was then that she became alarmed. Who were these people? How had they entered her room through a locked door? And why in hell did they not simply talk to me, who was asleep downstairs? She was also annoyed that they had not returned the chairs to their position.

I listened to ML’s story in utter astonishment. What she did not know and could not know was that for the past near eighteen months three invisible presences, two men and a woman, who were trying to engage me in conversation, had bedevilled me. My experience of them was one of intrusive thoughts accompanied by mental images that were not sharply defined, but clear enough to get the impression of three people aged maybe in their late thirties or early forties. I was sufficiently concerned to have sought psychiatric care, fearing I was going mad. I had told ML none of this, but now I had to confess, to offer some kind of explanation for her bizarre encounter. Our relationship rapidly deteriorated thereafter. She felt violated by the extreme and frightening nature of the event and did not want to be exposed to any repeat. I left the house soon after.

This was an early instance in a series of profoundly disruptive non-ordinary experiences that forced me to question the nature of the world I lived in, and the nature of experience within it. Not only did it force confrontation with conventional narrative assumptions of the Western cultural discourse (de Quincey 2002), but also, like other and similar experiences (further explored in Chapter Two), it had a devastating effect upon my sense of personal identity, my relationships and my ability to function in the world. What was going on? How could I find out?

While I had an interest in spiritual and philosophical matters, my orientation through my childhood had been scientific. I had commenced studying geology in grade five and had a passion for physics. My teachers and family expected I would go to university to study geology. This orientation placed me in an awkward position. I wanted to understand what was going on consistent with my customary sense of rational inquiry. What were the voices, why were they there, what did they mean? Acceptance of them as a spiritual or psychic phenomenon was not enough because all that did was clothe existing incomprehension in new language, without furthering understanding.

Non-ordinary experiences of a gentle kind were not unfamiliar to me. They did not challenge my capacity to dwell within the dominant cultural ontological frame because they did not radically
disrupt my sense of belonging to, and participating in, ‘normal life.’ I had intuitions and an uncanny ability to find things, aided by sudden flashes of insight. I had spent most of my youth in the bush in southern Tasmania with a profound sensitivity to place and atmosphere that sometimes created problems with my walking companions who found my refusal to sit or camp in a particular place a bit strange. But the ML experience, the first of a series of profoundly disruptive events, was of a very different order. It had involved another person and gave unexpected apparent verification to something that was, until then, entirely subjective and personal. It moved experience from that personal and subjective sphere into the objective – it made it ‘real’. At least it made it real in the sense that there were two participants, a shared experience. It was not verifiable and not repeatable. ML wanted no exposure to the risk of recurrence. I was left with a problem.

These intrusive experiences left me stranded in the shadowy realms of doubts about perception and sanity. Could I trust my own perceptions? I did not know. To have done so, I would have had to dared to go beyond what reason and courage I had at the time. But I was equally unable or unwilling to accept what seemed to be a simple and disengaged rejection of them. I felt I had entered a kind of limbo state in which I could trust neither external nor internal sources of knowledge. I had no ground upon which to stand and draw any sense of what was real, or what offered explanation and meaning.

ML’s bewildered and outraged report conveyed her sense of violation; not that being asked to pass on a message was offensive, but that the manner and nature of the intrusive participants in the experience constituted a shattering of her sense of the normal. She could have dismissed the encounter as a very strange dream, but she was confronted with the evidence of disarranged chairs. Not only was her ontological domain invaded, but also her personal space of material order had been offended against. Tidiness was a valued personal discipline and the ontological invaders had also been poor guests.

I compounded ML’s distress by telling her something that forcibly altered the options she had open to her. Denial that it was real was suddenly not an option. But she could contain the damage by rejection. If she stopped interacting with me she could minimise the risk of repetition and recover some sense of order, some return to safety. I never met ML again after I left the house, so I have no idea if or how she subsequently thought about what had happened.

The prospect of order and safety were not open to me. I had tried denial and rejection of the voices to no avail. And rather than being left in the unfortunate limbo between the prospect of madness and the discomfort of unwanted intrusion into consciousness the source of the voices had upped the ante by staging a dramatic demonstration that they were not delusions or misperceptions. So what were they? Where did they come from? And why were they intruding into my consciousness? This ‘why’
question had its own urgency to it, but I could not construct an answer at the time. I desperately wanted to know “Why is this happening to me?” But I also knew I needed to answer the ‘what’ and ‘where’ questions before the ‘why’ would make sense.

It seemed to me that when one’s delusions become disruptively proactive in asserting possession of a nature beyond being mere cerebral artefacts, a certain crisis is precipitated. The normal becomes an insufficient container of experience, which now extends into a domain that cannot be mere imagination or misperception. The voices became more than agents of personal misery. They became agents of disruptive change and challenge. If I were to accommodate their vandalism against the boundaries of my sense of reality, then I needed to admit that they existed in some state of being as active and intelligent entities. This was not part of the map of the real in which I had been educated. The map of the real had four dimensions, three of which accommodated the spatial and the fourth that accommodated the experiential. The experiential had levels of sensory, emotional and intellectual awareness and a dimly defined something called the religious or spiritual, whose validity as an experiential domain was subjected to doubt. To the extent that I had understanding of that doubtful domain it did not accommodate the disrupters. And they had no place in any other experiential domain either. In as much as I accepted their presence they occupied a domain unknown. How could I make sense of this unknown world from my position of ignorance and deep uncertainty?

It was becoming clearer that I needed to go beyond the boundaries of the Western cultural discourse to find any answers. Strangely, because I had been brought up on a diet of Western science and the naïve idealism about the truth-seeking character of science I was reluctant to seek answers in other cultural traditions. With the present advantage of hindsight I am now struck by the degree to which this reluctance influenced my subsequent course of inquiry. How could I make sense of what was happening to me and remain within my culture’s ontological domain?

The kind of radical and disruptive non-ordinary experiences I had, by their very nature, made it very difficult for me to think about them in conventional scientific terms. They came, had effect and departed. They were not available to repetition in any controlled way, or for verification. They seemed to be unreliable, save that they left a cumulative psychological impact upon me. This impact accumulated undischarged content that needed to be discharged in some manner. I was at real risk of becoming obsessed, not only with the intellectual problem presented but also with the personal sense of crisis of meaning and validity.

I felt tainted by a contamination that made me an outsider to the normal world in which I desired to dwell. The experiences were unsought and unwelcome, but they came in a manner that forced me to consider that they may possess some kind of validity. This question became the central pre-
occupation of my life. Clendennin (1999) captures something of drama of experiential contamination in her account of an Aboriginal woman who had had an encounter with French explorers on the Western Australian coast. She asks the reader to reflect on how the woman was received by her people afterwards: “Was she received at all? Was she shunned? Was she killed?” (p.4) In this case the woman’s sense of normality was invaded by pale ghosts from a strange bird like vessel, but we can understand and accommodate their identity. They were from our world after all

Like Clendennin’s Aboriginal woman, I had been struck by a strange phenomenen, and as I sought to integrate the experience I encountered reactions that sought to quarantine me, as the experiencer, as if I had been tainted. And I was not clear on whether I had been so, or not. I was dealing with my sense of identity, a precious thing to me, so whether it was now somehow tainted, whether I had become ‘mad’, seemed vitally important.

This work takes advantage of the opportunity, afforded by formal inquiry to bring discipline and structure to bear upon the questions of what had happened and whether it was real. It not only brings into the frame a later and more mature investigation but some novel and innovative ideas that arose out of the research are viewed in the context of the initial motive for inquiry. The opportunity to engage in research in a formal manner opened hitherto unexpected avenues of thought.

**Key Research Questions**

**How do I make sense of my experience of the non-ordinary?**

An imperative, on a personal level, was to satisfy the necessity of deriving meaning from the experiences. The questions were simple: “What is going on?” “What is happening to me?” “Why is this happening to me?” These were, at the time, pressing personal concerns that needed to be addressed. They have continued to shape my inquiry as I have sought answers, and as further questions have arisen.

Since the initial drama much of the angst associated with the disruption has been resolved. Nevertheless these experiences and their early impact constitute a vital and persisting energy that drives ongoing inquiry. The shift out of a sense of personal urgency into a more measured inquiry occurred as knowledge and experience progressively provided me with the content to frame my questioning in a wider context than the purely personal.
Could I find a way of fitting my experiences within my culture’s ontological narrative?

My initial experience of finding that what had happened to me was not validated within the cultural and ontological discourses of my culture precipitated a crisis. What was considered real, what was considered valid and valuable was framed by the beliefs and assumptions (scientific and religious) that dominated the cultural discourse, or at least that to which I had access, and my experiences did not fit within the boundaries of the real or the good. I discuss the issues of ontology and ontological crisis more deeply below.

As I inquired, I found possible and plausible explanations and answers in the religious and spiritual traditions of other cultures. I could have adopted a number of faith and philosophic traditions whose ontologies accommodated my experiences, but to have done so seemed to me to an abdication of my own heritage, as well as necessitating adherence to traditions and practices with which I felt no innate affinity.

I was imbued with, and fascinated by, Western culture. Perhaps, initially, I possessed a naïve and idealistic sense of scientific truth seeking, but the notion that the drama had to be worked out within my culture’s traditions and elements sat strongly with me, if not well articulated for quite some time. While I had dismissed Christianity as a faith tradition I had not wholly abandoned the prospect of a spirituality arising from within my culture. I had no reason to reject science.

The problem of fitting my experiences within my culture’s narrative as a valid expression of human experience was both a personal determination and an intellectual challenge. In neither respect did I have any idea what this may entail in terms of difficulty or complexity.

Towards the development of a Methodology – a discussion of Ontological, Epistemological and Methodological issues

My philosophical orientation is theistic, more specifically esoteric, in that it is chiefly influenced by the Western Mystery Tradition. This position has evolved from my early unquestioned acceptance of religion as a phenomenon. I abandoned adherence to the faith in which I was raised and, over time, in response to efforts to make meaning of my experiences progressively formulated a more coherent philosophical position. Here I will articulate this position as esoteric, because it has some impact on
how I address issues of ontology and epistemology that are expressed predominantly in the language of a philosophic tradition that is atheistic.

I am not seeking to set up a polarity between this esoteric orientation and postmodern thought so much as to establish that esoteric thought is from a different philosophical tradition to that, which informs discussion on qualitative method. This presents certain problems in that there while there are certain intersections with contemporary philosophical thought, there is not a perfect fit. There are problems in fitting esoteric constructs into contemporary philosophical discourse. This is an issue that Guba & Lincoln (2005) raise:

> Are paradigms commensurable? Is it possible to blend elements of one paradigm into another, so that one is engaging in research that represents the best of both worldviews? The answer, from our perspective, has to be a cautious yes. This is especially so if the models (paradigms) share axiomatic elements that are similar, or that resonate strongly between them.

> Commensurability is an issue only when researchers want to “pick and choose” among axioms of positivist and interpretivist models, because the axioms are contradictory and mutually exclusive. (p. 201)

At base, the esoteric paradigm differs from the atheistic at the level of certain axiomatic assumptions whose implications might suggest fundamental incompatibility of a magnitude similar to the perceived issues arising when seeking to blend positivist and interpretivist models. However there is also a high degree of harmony implicit in the interpretivist model that fits neatly within the esoteric tradition, especially where both are seeking to articulate philosophical positions arising from critical examination of contemporary Western culture. This is evident in Guba & Lincoln’s perception of the importance of “emancipation from hearing only the voices of Western Europe, emancipation from generations of silence, and emancipation from seeing the world in one color.” (2005 p.212)

Guba & Lincoln, reflecting on how they might do things different, in their evolving commentary on qualitative methodology observed that:

> … we would make values or, more correctly, axiology (the branch of philosophy dealing with ethics, aesthetics, and religion) a part of the basic foundational philosophical dimensions of paradigm proposal. Doing so, in our opinion, would help us see the embeddedness of ethics within, not external to, paradigms.

> The expansion of basic issues to include axiology, then, is one way of achieving greater confluence among the various interpretivist inquiry models. This is the place, for example, where Peter Reason’s profound concerns with “sacred science” and human functioning find legitimacy; it is a place where Laurel Richardson’s “sacred spaces” become authoritative sites for human inquiry; it is a place – or the place where the spiritual meets social inquiry, as Reason (1993), and later Lincoln and Denzin (1994), proposed some years earlier. (2005 p. 200)
However the difficulty in this more inclusive approach is also apparent, Guba & Lincoln observe that this:

leads us ineluctably toward the insight that there will be no single “conventional” paradigm to which all social scientists might ascribe in some common terms and with mutual understanding. Rather we stand at the threshold of a history marked by multivocality, contested meanings, paradigmatic controversies, and new textual forms. (2005 p. 212)

As an evolving work in progress, the inclusion of the spiritual or esoteric voice has come latterly, but there is a sense that it is just another mode of interpretation, and not yet a distinct paradigm that will generate and participate in “paradigmatic controversies”.

My concern here is to avoid the misperception that I am either an angry arriviste or an incompetent postmodern. The inclusion of the ‘spiritual voice’ is a welcome advance toward inclusion and pluralism and the “paradigmatic controversies” are not yet distilled from the present cloud of potentialities. In asserting that the esoteric position is a separate and distinct philosophic tradition articulation of both ontological and epistemological positions employing the language and the thought constructs of postmodernism may present some difficulties. I will endeavour to address them, as they arise, honouring the primacy of the postmodern discourse as the dominant philosophic school through which social sciences and qualitative inquiry are framed.

The Ontological problem

This research concerns the struggle to resolve an ontological crisis that arises from an experiential drama. An ontology frames the real and experiences that do not fit into the frame present a problem – either the experience is invalid (in and of itself or in how it is apprehended and interpreted) or the ontological frame is inadequate to the task of accommodating the spectrum of human experience, as instanced by particular events or phenomena. Historically the contest between ontologies and experience has not always led to the experience winning out. Sometimes victory arrives after a long struggle that may span generations. One thinks of Galileo and his struggle with the Church and its Aristotelian cosmology, and those who struggled to assert the primacy of reason and science over dogma.

My understanding of ontology as a researcher, is critically shaped by my understanding as an experiencer of radical phenomena, so there is an interaction between the two that presents the risk of the research content infecting the researcher. This has presented some genuine difficulties wherein researcher and subject, being one and the same, risk being conflated, and voices confused. One
perspective, the researcher’s, necessarily proceeds from the other, the experiencer’s. I have attempted to render this discussion entirely within the frame of the researcher.

Ontology, epistemology and methodology are formal terms that make a vital distinction between what is knowable, what relationship might be had between knowledge seeker and the knowable, and how one goes about knowing what is to be known. Ideally ontology, first predicated on assumptions – best guesses at devising a system of thought - is malleable and open to amendment as knowledge progresses. But in reality conscious and unconscious assumptions blend to create an explanatory narrative – a sense of the ‘real’, which provides emotional as well as intellectual comfort and orientation. This can lead to the ‘cementing’ of the ontological frame, such that non-conforming knowledge is excluded.

Ontology sets the boundaries of what is knowable and hence has a political dimension as well as philosophical or metaphysical one. Within its boundaries are what is validly knowable, and beyond is what is invalid knowledge. In Western history I identify two important watersheds. The first is the emergence of the hegemony of Christian thought, which sought to exclude knowledge that did not fall within its theological and doctrinal boundaries. The second was the emergence of humanist thought, both theistic and atheistic, eventually resolving into a dominance of atheistic humanism – exerting philosophic and political hegemony.

Postmodern thought is precipitating a collapse of the old verities, and in social science research, as Western culture embraces and accommodates worldviews from other cultures, those verities that once established a clear sense of us and other have lost their utility. The resultant dynamic is clearly articulated by Guba & Lincoln:

The postmodern turn suggests that no method can deliver on ultimate truth, and in fact “suspects all methods,” the more so the larger the claims to delivering on truth (Richardson, 1994)… no one would argue that a single method – or collection of methods – is the royal road to ultimate knowledge. In new-paradigm inquiry, however, it is not merely method that promises to deliver on some set of local or context-grounded truths, it is also the process of interpretation. This we have two arguments proceeding simultaneously. The first, borrowed from positivism, argues for a kind of rigor in the application of method, whereas the second argues for both a community consent and a form of rigor – defensible reasoning, plausible alongside some other reality that is known to author and reader – in ascribing salience to one interpretation over another and for framing and bounding an interpretative study itself.

It is the second kind of rigor, however, that has received the most attention in recent writings: Are we interpretively rigorous? Can our cocreated constructions be trusted to provide some purchase on some important human phenomenon.
New-paradigm inquirers, however, are increasingly concerned with the single experience, the individual crisis, the epiphany or moment of discovery, with that most powerful of all threats to conventional objectivity, feeling and emotion. (2005 p. 205)

The emergent problem is that of collapsing ontological boundaries, such that while a position may be asserted, it cannot be rightly held to represent a truth beyond the personal, or the collective. Large-scale ontological positions, where they represented the endeavour of a culture in a uniform manner, presented a touchstone from, and upon, which certain rigor could be applied in the construction of a discourse. But once absolute truth can no longer be invested in such a construct, even the idea of an ontology itself becomes problematic. The question then arises as to how, at the atomised level of individual experience, do we collectively arrive at agreement?

In some respects this question is answered by incorporation of the axiological domain, allowing that values, rather than ideas, may constitute a sounder foundation for shared experience. This shifts the focus from the assumptive process of creating metaphysical constructs as boundaries to belief to a conduct-based approach, and alters the focus away from ontology toward epistemology as a primary consideration.

While this addresses significant problems generated by pluralism at the level of functional social science (how we might better live together), it does leave more complex metaphysical questions unaddressed. In some respects social science, inheriting notions of ‘science’, is captured by this past association with a tradition of ontological certainty, and the emergent trends suggest a different sense of ‘science’, as we see with the questions about interpretive rigour. As noted above by Guba & Lincoln, movement into “new-paradigm” thinking, exploring the individual experience and the role and power of emotions as powerful contributors to constructing meaning creates new problems of how one might establish interpretive rigour, especially if the paradigm boundaries are porous and indeterminate.

From an esoteric perspective there is a good fit with the interest in the personal experience, especially that which is transformative. “...personal crisis, epiphany or moment of discovery” might all be said to be transformative at the level of disrupting the personal ontological frame, exposing possibilities, and this is particularly pertinent to this research.

As with any system of thought, esotericism relies upon certain ‘givens’ as foundational ideas, without which organization of interpretative and critical thought is impossible in any systematic sense. This is not to suggest that these givens constitute a Truth, so much as an organising structure, and hence far more relevant to epistemological than ontological consideration. Nevertheless, as a researcher, my thought is informed by certain ontological assumptions – that of a meaning-drenched cosmos and a cohering pervasive intelligence. These are not propositions that are available to
verification, or falsification, but positions that are assumed to be true arising from interpretation of personal experience and what seems to be an innate orientation of personality.

These then inform inquiry in one important respect. The assumption of a meaning-drenched cosmos may establish a distinction between meaning-making as an action of construction as opposed to an action of alignment. The difference being that in the latter the focus of attention is upon enabling one’s mind to become available to inherent, extant meaning that is beyond the purely personal. As touched on above, this may constitute a problem of the commensurability of paradigms, with the risk that one may embraces some elements of interpretivist paradigm, but with a sleeper axiomatic contention. At this stage of the development of thinking on this theme I cannot go beyond noting the potential for contention.

**Conflicting paradigms at the level of experience**

The necessity of the adoption of what de Quincey (2002) calls a narrative premise is recognised by Guba and Lincoln (2005) in their assertion that a paradigm is “the most informed and sophisticated view that its proponents have been able to devise … advocates of any particular construction must rely on persuasiveness and utility rather than proof in arguing their position.” (p. 108) One might add that this argument applies not only to the civil practice of intellectual discourse but to the broader politics of life in which persuasiveness and utility can manifest in a multitude of ways, including tyrannies of force and exploitation. The assumptions may be metaphysical but the consequences are political. One also needs to distinguish between those paradigms constructed from formal and disciplined processes of thought and argument and those that arise within the culture, received from philosophers and interpreted to meet the complex necessities and utilities of social life. Paradigms cannot escape unconscious construction as well.

Here self as researcher seeks to deal with the formal articulations of ontologies, where as self as research subject engaged with the culture’s informal, but potent paradigms. Between the formal and the informal, and the conscious and unconscious there needs to be sufficient traffic so that we do not imagine that the formal is pristine reason devoid of the ‘taint’ of informal and unconscious assumptions, or that the informal is devoid of substantially reasoned grounds.

The phenomena that lie at the root of this research lay outside the sphere of both formal and informal ontological constructions, in the sense that both represented the dominant cultural belief systems available at the time of experiencing them. They did not lie outside the ontological spheres of members of the culture, but the early ontological crisis did point to the problem of dominant
discourses shaping response to phenomena, and the precipitation of a crisis that was not just the phenomena themselves being individually or collectively challenging, but constraints of available explanatory models. In this instance the problem of validity of the experience arose because none of the immediately available paradigm models admitted them. The predominantly Positivist model denied that there was a source for such phenomena, and the religious model, provided the paradox of allowing possible validity of the phenomena as phenomena, but denying their validity on moral grounds as coming from a source unacceptable.

As Guba & Lincoln observe: “validity is a more irritating construct, one neither easily dismissed nor readily configured by new-paradigm practitioners (Enerstwedt, 1989; Tschudi, 1989). Validity cannot be dismissed simply because it points to a question that has to be answered in one way or another: Are these findings sufficiently authentic…” (2005 p. 205). Once one accepts that an experience has occurred, and that it merits investigation, the validity of what happened being as the experiencer declares it to be, can become problematic if the ontological constructs of the inquirer deny the probability of such happening as an ‘objective’ event – that is an event that might be said to be independent of the experiencer or the inquirer regardless of their ontological assumptions.

In separating the experiencer/inquirer in a research context at the level of ontological assumptions, where one informs the other, my ontological position, as a researcher is that such phenomena are ‘objectively’ real and can be generated by the ontological model discussed above. The problem of validity, outside the constraints of ontological delimitations, does not exist at the level of the phenomena, but different problems of validity arise at the level of interpretation, of asking “What do these phenomena mean?”. This question has both a personal and a collective edge to it. What they mean as personal encounter in an experiential environment in which they are decidedly non-ordinary is a different question to what they mean in the context of a shared ontological construction.

At the personal level, interrogating meaning satisfies urgent and essential concerns. At the level of shared experience, where consideration of such phenomena might be taken to have implications for the constitution of ontological construction at a collective level other problems emerge, and here the test of validity has a different set of imperatives.

In asserting that the phenomena have ‘objective reality’ I am clearly stamping the imprint of my esoteric ontology on the research project, and perhaps precipitating an ontological contention. However it is important to observe here that I acknowledge that such an assertion does arise from a set of assumptions, and is hence relative to those assumptions. Bailey (1983) articulates neatly the esoteric perspective, saying that “The world of phenomenon is not denied, but we regard the mind as misinterpreting it.” (p. 21) Here Bailey is referring to the phenomenal world in general, distinguishing between those who assert it is, in essence, illusory and those who assert that
perception of, and interpretation of it is substantially illusory. The distinction is at the level of meaning-making, whether what appears to the senses is at it appears, or has a deeper, more intrinsic, nature.

It is at this level that esoteric and interpretivist thought have apparent harmony, for the esoteric inquirer is as much influenced by received and conditioned, or habituated, modes of interpretation and meaning-making as any other inquirer. Bailey sees the task of the esoteric inquirer is “...to interpret and to penetrate to meaning.” (1983 p.13). This meaning being that assumed to be extant as an essential part of the esoteric ontology.

**The Epistemological problem**

Guba & Lincoln make the vital observation that:

“For new-paradigm inquirers who have seen the pre-eminent paradigm issues of ontology and epistemology effectively folded into one another, and who have watched as methodology and axiology logically folded into one another (Lincoln, 1995,1997), control of an inquiry seems far less problematic.” (2005 p. 202)

The uncertainties that arise on the ontological level, in terms of any universal truth, alter to focus the level of epistemology, and the relationship between the knower and the knowing, rather than the knowledge. In effect it is this relationship between the experiencer (the knower) and the experience (the knowing), especially when axiological considerations enter the frame. That becomes the focus of questions about validity and rigour. These, Guba & Lincoln suggest, can be address in the context of control as a “means for fostering emancipation, democracy, and community empowerment, and of redressing power imbalances such that those who were previously marginalized now achieve voice.” (2005 p. 202) The idea of control at this level enables contention and negotiation over the legitimacy of the questions that might be asked, by demonstrating that some paradigms “are incommensurable”, leading to questions that have meaning in one framework and none in another.

The shift of control away from the dominant paradigms, especially those that invalidate experience or marginalise the experiencer as invalid or non-compliant, and vesting it at the level of the individual or the group, enables a negotiation of terms and rules that reflect the voice of the experiencer and their ontological articulations.
There is critical proposition that:

...if knowledge of the social (as opposed to the physical) world resides in meaning-making mechanisms of the social, mental and linguistic worlds that individuals inhabit, then knowledge cannot be separate from the knower, but rather is rooted in his or her mental or linguistic designations of that world (Polkinghorne, 1989; Salner, 1989). (2005 p. 202)

Here Guba & Lincoln seek to distinguish this perception from the Positivist notion of objectivity, observing, “Paradigmatic formulations interact such that control becomes inextricably intertwined with mandates for objectivity.” (2005 p. 202). That is to say that if meaning-making is an internal process, bound up with the experience of being human, then the control exercised by the assertion of a state of objectivity (which is a paradigmatic assumption) is negated.

Here, however, it is necessary to distinguish between the proposition of an objective reality and the relationship with it. Brandon (2007) quotes Physicist John Wheeler, saying that:

We had this old idea, that the universe was out there and here is man, the observer…. Now we learn from the quantum world that even to observe so miniscule an object as an electron…we have to reach in there … So the old word observer simply has to be crossed off the books, and we must put in a new word participant. (p. xi)

The idea that we have a participatory relationship with the world suggests an intersection of being and experience between self and the world. This intersection arises and expresses, is rooted, in the “mental or linguistic designations” of the individual’s world. Controlling paradigms, whether scientific, philosophical or theological seek to manage thought and conduct of individuals or groups in conformity to particular expectations and utilities expressed by dominant powers.

Hence the recognition of the primacy of the individual experience in meaning-making, and the desire to vest control at that level, favouring emancipatory and democratic negotiation of shared meaning-making reflects a fundamental shift away from older notions of control, conformity and validation. One is reminded of the opening words to the television program, Monkey, “With our minds we create the world.” The broader process of inquiry and research, in a social science context, is moving towards emancipation of the contributory and participatory role of the individual in the evolution of shared and collective meaning, rather than the expectation of conformity with dominant and received paradigms and values.
This evolutionary development reflects a collaborative rather than a received approach to knowledge making and shifts the sense of power from hegemonic paradigms to a collectivist creative process. Guba & Lincoln sum it up neatly:

As one of us has argued, truth – and any agreement regarding what is valid knowledge – arises from the relationship between members of some stakeholding community (Lincoln 1995). Agreements about truth may be the subject of community negotiations regarding what will be accepted as true... Or agreements may eventuate as the result of a dialogue that moves arguments about truth claims or validity past warring camps of objectivity and relativity toward a “communal test of validity through the argumentation of the participants in a discourse.” ...Schwandt (1989) has also argued that these discourses, or community narratives, can and should be bounded by moral considerations, a premise grounded in the participatory narratives of the critical theorists, the philosophical pragmatism of Rorty, the democratic focus of constructivist inquiry, and the “human flourishing goals” of participatory and cooperative inquiry. (2005 p. 204)

The interest in individual experience of a transformational kind offers some yet to be fully explored contributions to this ideal approach, especially when such experiences may generate challenges to shared paradigmatic constructs that do not fit neatly into a negotiated or democratic model, other than to ‘park’ their implications to one side because democratic and negotiated accommodations may be neither possible nor especially relevant. This, however, moves outside the predominantly social science focus of these considerations, where the bulk of experiences do not fall within the ‘non-ordinary’ or paranormal definition. At this level some additional considerations are necessary.

The esoteric perspective has considerable sympathy with the overall trajectory towards the honouring and empowering of individual meaning-making, and the recognition of a contributory and participatory role in shared meaning-making. Bailey declares the objective of a student of esotericism is to “train yourself in the recognition of ideas and concepts as they lie behind every form.” (1983 p. 14). She also emphasises the importance of “the acuteness of the intellect, and the illumination of the mind, plus love and intention.“ (1983 p. 24). Esoteric teaching also involves group participation and shared review of experience, and so might also be said to share the ideal of emancipatory and democratic meaning-making.

The distinction of esoteric thought lies in the presumption of deeper meaning, and hence there is an expectation of shared meaning-making being a common endeavour toward that deeper meaning. Bailey (1983) asserts that “Symbols are the outer and visible forms of the inner spiritual realities.” (1983 p. 6) and that the study of symbols involves investigation of “form, emotional qualities, underpinning conception” to develop “a synthetic grasp” and a sense of “deeper quality or purpose” (1983 p. 11). In seeing that all things in the “objective world” are but imperfect expression of a divine idea, Bailey is arguing that there is a clear objective in meaning-making from an esoteric perspective – to discover what lies behind appearances. This perspective fits with the idea that
discourses should be bound by moral considerations that focus on conduct and relationships (in the broader sense of more than human to human interaction) such that knowledge serves a function of enhancing the lived experience of self and others.

I am personally committed to the idea that knowledge-seeking should have a function that is beyond the desire to exert control or influence over the world, and that such a function relates to self-awareness, enhancing the capacity for conduct and relationships that promote the idea of “human flourishing”, albeit within a sense of ecological and spiritual awareness. The emancipatory function of inquiry, seeking to liberate the personal voice to participate freely and fearlessly in shared dialogue as part of a collective endeavour to articulate meaning, represents a fusion of both spiritual and social ideals.

In the particular context of this research project, the process of inquiry engages areas that have been traditionally marginalised and disenfranchised. The theme of ontological crisis precipitated by paranormal experiences necessitates the respectful exploration of territory that is not traditionally part of the cultural discourse. It moves beyond the Western voice and its traditional monotonal articulation of a particular scope of ontological possibilities.

The combination of themes of personal crisis and of articulation of a minority and traditionally marginalised worldview reflects some of the elements of new paradigm thinking, and seeks not so much a fusion of ideas as to chart how, once the process of inquiry is commenced, certain pathways open up. And these pathways move in and out of cultural boundaries, and in and out of temporal zones. This is not a haphazard meandering so much as an act of weaving, of evidence gathering, searching for a thing that has been subsumed beneath the mass of cultural discourse, of habituated interpretation, of privileging dominant and dominating paradigms.

In the sense that knowledge inhabits the inner world of the individual, shaped by language, culture, learning and ontological assumptions or conditioning, it is also shaped by what is available and accessible. Where an individual from another extant culture dwells within a Western culture, recovery of cultural roots and identity is possible because it is possible to return to that culture and become immersed in it for a time, and to bring back mementos and symbols. But where that culture is no longer extant as a cogent entity, having a defined spatial and temporal location, the task is more difficult. The experiences explored here, in effect, belong to a culture in which they have meaning and validity. They sit within an ontological frame that honours them. They possess a meaning that is at first a tentative uncertain interpretation that dwells initially wholly within the ‘world’ of the experiencer as an intellectual and emotional and spiritual experiences.
The process of articulation becomes a process of construction, as ideas, as evidences, are gathered and assembled into a coherent entity whose shape is neither finely defined nor perfect. The articulation of response to the paranormal, of validation of the phenomena and the experience of the individual is an emergent and evolving matter. The movement from the private domain to the shared domain is the goal of this research project. It is a participation in the significant and ongoing adventure of reshaping the field of possibilities within which the collective human endeavour of making meaning occurs.

**Methodology**

There is a twin focus to this inquiry. The engagement with propositions of ontological validity/invalidity and the boundaries and constructs that inform the dominant cultural narrative, and the exploration of the experience of disruptive phenomena are interrogated as a process of personal meaning making.

The essential foundation of the thesis is the experience of disruptive phenomena of a non-ordinary kind that precipitated profound distress to my personal sense of meaning, further exacerbated by the inability to validate them within the available ontological frames provided by the dominant cultural discourses. What were they? What did they mean? Why were they happening to me?

The absence of repeatability, of reiteration, rendered the prospect of engaging the phenomena as a subject of inquiry impossible. I was left with the experience of the experience – an accumulation of novel disruptive experiences that exhibited no sensible pattern, and whose progressive and collective impact seemed only the precipitation of more dramatic doubts, with resultant anxieties and pre-occupations.

How do I now structure an inquiry into this experience? Several methodological approaches appear to offer useful tools. Principal among them, phenomenology and hermeneutics, have utilities and limitations, which I will discuss below.

**Phenomenology and hermeneutics as a methodological approach**

Laverty (2003) summarises the view of phenomenology as “the study of the lived experience or the life world” and further recounts Husserl’s idea of the “life world as what is experienced pre-reflectively. She says that “The study of these phenomena intends to return and re-examine these
taken for granted experiences and perhaps uncover new and/or forgotten meanings.” (p. 4) Husserl proposed a method of “bracketing”, effectively suspending operative ideas about a phenomenon in order to perceive its essence. Laverty cites Klein and Westcott (1994) identifying a “three-fold process including exemplary intuition, imaginative variation, and synthesis.” (2003 p. 6) Laverty summarises Husserl’s goal as “to actually see things as they are” through intuitive seeing. He sought to show the purely immanent character of conscious experience by means of careful description.

Heidegger’s hermeneutic approach borrows partly from Husserl’s phenomenological thought, and proposes that personal history and background establish an understanding of the world. “Through this understanding, one determines what is ‘real’, yet Heidegger also believed that one’s background cannot be made completely complicit. Munhall (1989) described Heidegger as having a view of people and the world as indissolubly related in cultural, social and in historical contexts.” (Laverty 2003 p. 8)

This key distinction between the ability to suspend operative discourses and the extent to which history and culture condition perception suggests that one may interpret a phenomenon through a methodology that exits perception from the ground of cultural and historical conditioning or one interprets a phenomenon through the conditioning. Laverty says that Heidegger “stressed that every encounter involves an interpretation influenced by an individual’s background or historicity.” (2003 p. 9) This interpretative process, hermeneutics, is seen to be an engagement with the filters of culture and history, through language, although the original meaning is expanded so that ‘texts’ can mean virtually all forms of human expression and communication.

In a sense this argument is circular – we are influenced by the environment (natural, cultural or societal – including the historic) and respond, interact, generating influence in consequence. Phenomena or meaning generated within human domain (history and culture) feed, and feed off each other. Schwartz and Russek (1999), discussing positive feedback observe that “When a system is constructed with a positive feedback loop, the system’s behaviour grows over time. This “learning” unfolds dynamically and potentially explosively.” And “… positive feedback, carried to an extreme, ultimately destroys the wholeness of the system.” (p. 61). The argument that Schwartz and Russek put is that systemic memory or learning within a system accumulates, with potentially catastrophic consequences. In effect, meaning collapses. However this collapse, Briggs & Peat (1999), would argue, in the context of Chaos Theory, leads to “moments … of bifurcation – our degrees of freedom ..” (p. 29) from whence creative opportunities in meaning making arise.

This risk is also recognised by Mugerauer (1994), who says that “The danger, of course, is that with so many meanings there is no way to discern one from another, we risk shifting from an overbearing dogmatism to a useless scepticism and relativism.” (p. 7). Here he sees the hermeneutic tradition
moving from the dogmatism inherent in its religious roots toward the scepticism that is inherent in the later Critical theories, no longer engaging in the foundation questions that incorporate some sense of deity. He sees that “The shift has attempted to open us again to indeterminacy, to undecidability, to ambiguity, to polysemous meaning.” (1994). The indeterminacy that arises from Quantum theory has blended with scepticism, giving permission to it, in effect, but leading, ultimately, to a problem. Mugerauer asserts that “If there is no reality or deep meaning, hermeneutics fails.” (1994 p. 15). Here Mugerauer obliges consideration of a return to the hermeneutic roots as interpretation of religious texts that assumed a deeper meaning – and whether there is deeper meaning is a critical question.

Mugerauer goes on to argue that it “is not whether we need a rigorous, uncompromising criticism of current assumptions and cultural constructions…. (but) whether to embrace (1) the sceptical line of thought as carried out by Foucault’s, Derrida’s, and others’ strategies, or whether better alternatives lie either (2) on the hermeneutical right as represented by Eliade or (3) the middle way with the later Heidegger.” (p. 56) While it is not clear to me why Mugerauer identifies Eliade as belonging to the “hermeneutic right”, he describes Eliade’s position, saying “He (Eliade) contends that a phenomenological hermeneutics of the sacred is an alternative that overcomes the scepticism in which Derrida and Foucault find themselves. They, of course, would include Eliade in the tradition they seek to expose and abolish.” (p. 56)

The idea of “phenomenological hermeneutics of the sacred” suggests that interrogation of traditions, histories, cultures in which the sacred is regarded as real provides an alternative to an approach that asserts that such are only human constructs. The ontological assumptions of the humanist tradition contend with the ontological assumptions (whether as an assertion of actuality or an allowance of the possibility) of those who hold that the sacred may represent a different ontological frame.

Hermeneutics or hermeneutic phenomenology, articulated as interpretation of cultural and social phenomena through ‘texts’ runs this risk of escalating reciprocation that, without a sense of deeper meaning, may lead to collapse of meaning. Phenomenology in, Husserl’s terms, at least, through the attempt suspend hermeneutic conditioning in engaging with phenomena, and through the application of intuition, at least enables extra-systemic input. In effect Husserl allows for the ontological assumptions to be breached and novel, non-systemic insights to arise.

Husserl’s three-phase methodology is not unlike the meditative and contemplative methods employed in a variety of disciplines whose essential character is mystical or metaphysical. It is certainly similar to the active or dynamic meditation techniques in which I was trained in a number of esoteric schools. The object was substantially the same – to move beyond assumptive and conditioned interpretation and to consider an idea as a series of essential and progressively
deepening meanings. Heidegger’s assertion that one is completely bound by the conditioning of history and heritage does not account for intentional schooling in methods of reducing such influences. One may not ultimately escape the constructive influences of culture and history, but one may certainly intentionally take steps to ameliorate or diminish such influence, provided, doing so is a desired thing. In my case the influence of phenomena that do not lie within the cultural landscape, between the ontological horizons, similarly disrupt the otherwise pervasive influence of conditioning forces.

In a tighter meaning, hermeneutics, as a means of interpreting texts, with the intent of extracting the depth of meaning, whether intentional or unintentional, is a useful methodology.

In Guba and Lincoln’s description of Constructivism “Knowledge consists of those constructions about which there is relative consensus (or at least some movement toward consensus) among those competent (and, in the case of more arcane material, trusted) to interpret the substance of the construction.” (p. 113). This makes the point that competence to interpret echoes the root of hermeneutics as the skilled interpretation of religious texts. But as the meaning of hermeneutics has changed, so has the root of meaning – from a source supposed to be of divine origin or inspiration to the purely human. In effect the original notion of hermeneutics might be said to be the ability to discern extra-systemic meaning, rather than participation in a feedback loop, no matter how scholarly that may be.

Husserl’s preparedness to suspend the engagement of conditioned interpretative reflexes suggests a challenge to ‘step outside’ the reflexive and habituated internal dialogue that describes and sustains the familiar world. The extent to which this is possible in an absolute sense is doubtful, but movement of any kind that alters perspective offers the prospect of new insights. That means to suspend the assumed validity of one’s ontological assumptions, but more importantly it concerns, also, the suspension of how questions are to be framed. “What is going on here?’ and ‘What does this mean?’ can be asked from within an assumption that one possesses the knowledge needed to find the answers, or it requires an abandonment of conditioned thought, and this can have far more potent emotional implications than purely intellectual ones.

From hermeneutics, from the process of critical analysis of discourses or texts I see that this same kind of capacity to ‘step outside’ habituated interpretation provides an opportunity for seeing both the intentional and unintentional meaning in texts. As Guba and Lincoln observe in their discussion of the etic/emic dilemma (2005 p. 106) the emic (insider) is often estranged from the works of etic theorists, but so much scholarship and so much history is written by outsiders and victors, that seeking evidence of that which has been overwhelmed by more vigorous ontologies is not
uncommonly a forensic hermeneutic challenge. The facts of one theory may be rescued and presented as facts of an entirely different nature in a different theory.

Mugerauer’s critique of Eliade potentially rescues phenomenological hermeneutics in my case, from the risk of constructing a cosmology that is essentially quizzical hurled flat all the way down to the prospect that a given ontological frame, provided it has not utterly ruled out alternative ontologies, may be open to extra-systemic input. However here the meaning of phenomenology has to be more than the content of the lifeworld, as proposed by van Manen, and be expanded to include any phenomena, and especially, in this context, that which may be classified as ‘paranormal’. Gadamer argues that hermeneutics also serves “clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place” (Laverty 2003 p. 10), so phenomenological hermeneutics might embrace exploration of non-ordinary phenomena, and from a standpoint of assuming that there may be a ‘deep meaning’ beyond that constructed by the intellect and the imagination of the inquirer.

My esoteric orientation finds considerable sympathy with Constructivism, I recognise that it is, in Guba and Lincoln’s terms, a polarity opposite and relative to Positivism – the extreme of qualitative thought that seeks to honour the individual voice and a participant in, and co-contributor to, a certain sense of the ‘real’. In not agreeing with the metaphysical assumptions, I am not disputing the merits of the essential methodological elements – hermeneutical and dialectical (p. 109), as well as the adjectives that might be also applied to reflect a more inclusive honouring of individual voices, especially those who are nonmainstream.

Ultimately the ontological presumption of theism leads to an epistemological position that presumes that knowledge seeking remains in constant relation to deity, or a sense of the sacred, as the pole star might serve as an orientation to a traveller – beyond and unrelated to the journey and the landscape but nevertheless a symbol of orientation of thought and action that is an extra-systemic potentiality. The essential distinction between theistic and atheistic knowledge seeking lies in the assumption of an orientating principle innate in the nature of ‘reality’. Thus, in a methodological sense, the process of investigation, of critiquing and analysis requires suspension of presumption that can have the consequence of seeming to displace the inquirer from even the very environment that supports the inquiry. However there is an essential sense of orientation, toward deep meaning, that requires an anticipation of extra-systemic input, as inspiration, or intuition, more in line with Husserl’s three-phase model.
Hermeneutics, text and discourse analysis

In textual or discourse analysis, as part of the research process, analysis and interpretation of the evidence found can be problematic. From an esoteric perspective there is a singular problem that emerges when engaging with texts that fall within the interest of this research project. It is that some authors writing on esoteric topics presume the reader will concur with interpretations and conclusion on the basis of the evidence that is presented, and this evidence may lack the rigour and depth to render the process from argument to conclusion meritorious, as it stands, in the text. To a substantial degree this concerns writing for a readership that is expected to share a common set of beliefs, and, sometimes, a common willingness to accept assertions that accord with those beliefs, without necessarily requiring them to be backed by critical evidence. From an insider perspective such texts contain much that is valuable. They may, for example, articulate a particular tradition, from a ‘believer’ perspective, or describe practices and beliefs. They may reflect considerable learning and expertise with the subject, but they are not always generated from a disciplined and critical environment.

I have adopted several approaches to deal with this difficulty. In the first instance some source material is acknowledged as scholastically unreliable as a source of information, but it provides insight into the application of knowledge, and how it is interpreted. As a rule those who are engaged in the various practices and who adhere to the knowledge systems discussed are not approaching their involvement from an academic perspective, so it is not appropriate to apply an academic criterion to their work.

Academically qualified researchers not working within the academic systems have conducted a considerable body of research, and hence, while the research has value, the style of presentation of conclusions tends to accord more with commercial publishing interests than balanced or cautious conclusions. It is very difficult to find a balanced critique of esoteric thought. For example, commentaries tend to be either for or against, and it is likewise very difficult to come across material that integrates esoteric thought with ‘mainstream’ thought.

My approach has been to employ a hermeneutic analysis, employing the older sense of the term, relying upon a blend of extensive readings, direct practical experience (for example training with the Western esoteric tradition) as well as direct personal experience to propose alternative interpretations. These interpretations may conflict with the authors of the texts and appear as critical in an adverse sense. However the challenge of interpretation is not to denigrate the scholarship, but to bring to bear an alternative analysis, from a different ontological and experiential perspective.
The paucity of balanced and critical inquiry conducted by theists means that there is not a great deal of material whose argument stands up to contemporary academic scrutiny, and which supports my thesis without qualification. This is the consequence of proposing an argument from a marginal perspective.

A key strategy has emerged out of this situation, and that is the employment of ‘big ideas’. These are stand out ideas that arise out of sound scholarship, and which are articulated by the scholar without apparent awareness of the implications of their statement. A good example of this is Campbell’s observation of humanity’s “loss of essential identity with the divine organic being of the cosmos...” (1972 p. 76). Campbell assumes this is an unalloyed ‘good thing’, without subjecting the observation to any critical reflection. He does not ask “Is this a good thing?” In effect he establishes a vital watershed in human consciousness without exploring it. He identified a significant change in human thought and sees it only within the context of a modern looking back without any particular anxiety about where contemporary thought has led us. In Broomfield’s (1997) sense, contemporary doubts may now lead to asking “Was this such a good thing after all?”, and this line of thought, hitherto unavailable, opens up. I am grateful that Campbell’s scholarship led him to make this assertion, because it focused my mind upon a question that would never, otherwise, have arisen. I disagree with Campbell’s conclusion. He presumes his interpretation because he is a mythographer and has imbibed a cultural discourse with lesser critical awareness than might be employed in a contemporary context.

In any research there must be a distinction between the evidence gathered and the conclusions drawn. Has the evidence been gathered with merit? How have conclusions been arrived at? Evidence gathering can be less problematic than conclusion making. And evidence gatherers do not have sole rights to interpretation of their findings, once they are published.

Employing a hermeneutic methodology provides a basis for disputing conclusion, rather than arguing about the evidence, when it is accepted that the interpreter has some valid expertise in relation to the matter under examination. Hence a critical approach, disagreeing with conclusion, does not imply fundamental criticism of the overall endeavour. This is consistent with Guba and Lincoln’s observation on authority in relation to Constructivist thought, provided, of course that the interpreter is not dismissed as an ontological intruder, or arriviste.
Development of a methodological approach

Elements of a phenomenological hermeneutic perspective, with the above caveats have useful elements. However because the experiences discussed are singular and transient they can be applied less to them than to a broader sense of inquiry into accommodation of what, for Western culture and its dominant ontologies are non-compliant and non-ordinary phenomena, and in particular to the wider contemporary preparedness to embrace non-traditional knowledge.

This also very much an *emic* inquiry, requiring an insider voice. And because that voice is also conditioned by a set of ontological assumptions that embrace a theistic perspective there is a need to exercise close control over the expression of description, analysis and argument. This also leads to the necessity of employing a hermeneutic element to the methodology with a measure of knowledge that is also essentially *emic* in character.

Autoethnography provides an ideal methodological frame. Given that self-writing extends the extremes of qualitative inquiry it is useful to first review some of the objections and cautions that have been raised before proceeding to further develop how this methodology will be employed.

Autoethnography

The experience of personal response to phenomenal outrage, precipitating an ontological crisis was undertaken from a naive position of possessing no useful knowledge and no intellectual discipline. It was, initially, an urgent need to discover meaning and recover some sense of personal validity. The subsequent accumulation of knowledge and experience ameliorated the personal crisis, and moved the focus of inquiry progressively toward the problem of the mismatch between personal experience and the ontological boundaries of my culture, which opposed validation of the experience. But this was not undertaken with any sense of formal discipline, and as a result lacked structure and coherence.

The present endeavour, as a formal research project, revisits my experiences from an academic perspective. It is a new inquiry in the sense that I have abandoned the old inquiry with its lack of method and discipline, and stepped back from the inhibiting personal engagement. I want to tell my story as an inquiry into the struggle with what is knowable, what constitutes valid knowing, and how that struggle progressed from a particular perspective.
Autoethnography represents the best methodological approach because it combines two perspectives – self as the participant in a series of dramas wherein the focus is on “What does this mean to me?” and self as academic inquirer proposing that the subject has wider meaning and value, in a cultural context.

Autoethnography is one of a number of emerging qualitative methods whose employment as a valid research method is still subject to cautions and concerns. I propose presenting an argument for this method by exploring some of the objections and cautions raised as well as articulating the strengths. Ellis & Bochner define autoethnography as:

“an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations”. (2000 p. 739)

This definition is not so much fixed as evolving because; “Like many terms used by social scientists the meanings and applications of autoethnography have evolved in a manner that makes precise definition and application difficult” (2000 p. 739).

It is this connection between the personal and the cultural that is the locus of problematic interchange that is the focus of this thesis, when the personal experiences do not find, immediately, any connection with the cultural that validates and includes it. The cultural is a dominant “narrative premise” that de Quincey says is a set of assumptions that “dramatically shapes the way we know and interact with the world.” (2002 p. 44) Through the autoethnographical approach these assumptions can be brought into finer perspective, highlighting discontinuities and complexities between the individual and the collective, restoring the fractal extensions, the nuances, the delicate dramas of personal experience so often overshadowed by the larger voices of the collective. They can be rendered conscious in Broomfield’s (1997) sense. Traditionally the deeply personal has been sacrificed to disruption of the collective narrative, but Western culture now increasingly admits the individual voice as a participant in, and a contributor to, the shared, collective making of meaning.

The disruption of the formal scientific voice within the social sciences has been evolving into an alternative mode in which the self is no longer excised as an unreliable source of knowledge, but the primary source of knowledge. Bochner’s voice traces the evolution of his position, saying that the ideas of Barthes (1977), Derrida (1978, 1981) and Foucault (1970):
Bakhtin (1981), the interpretative space available to the reader was broadened, encouraging multiple perspectives, unsettled meanings, plural voices, and local and illegitimate knowledges that transgress against the claims of a unitary body of theory. (2000 p. 735)

And

No strong case could be made that human knowledge was independent of the human mind. All truths were contingent on the describing activities of human beings. No sharp distinctions could be made between facts and values. If we couldn’t eliminate the influence of the observer on the observed, then no theories or findings could ever be completely free of human values. The investigator would always be implicated in the product … And why not write more directly, from the source of your own experience? (2000 p. 747)

Criticisms that the ‘scientific’ approach to inquiry into the human condition may not be as useful as previously asserted are growing. Laverty (2003) observes that “Increasing questions emerged about the focus on inquiry, as well as exploration of methodologies that emphasized discovery, description and meaning rather than prediction control and measurement.” (p. 2) Laverty goes on to sum up a sense of crisis, saying “…there is a growing recognition of the limitations of addressing many significant questions in the human realm within the requirements of empirical methods and its quest for indubitable truth.” (2003 p. 2)

Doubts about the capacity of Positivist and Postpositivist methods to provide useful information about the human condition oblige development of alternative methodologies; ones that accommodate the growing focus on the experience of being human. And as experience is more honoured as the root of knowing, the individual voice must evolve its capacity to speak for itself.

Self-writing has the advantage of the authentic voice unmediated by an external inquirer who must filter reportage through their own ontological constructs. As an emerging, rather than an established, methodology there are genuine concerns and one may expect that these will continue to generate legitimate questions for some time yet.

As Ellis reflects, “It’s certainly not something that most people can do well. Most social scientists don’t write well enough to carry it off. Or they are not sufficiently introspective about their feelings or motives, or the contradictions they experience. Ironically, many aren’t observant enough about the world around them. The self-questioning autoethnography demands is extremely difficult.” (2000 p. 738). Part of this difficulty is discerning the depth to which such self-questioning is permissible and possible. At one extreme the metaphysical and philosophical permits deep doubt, and at the other questioning the norms, givens and verities of culture exposes one to the politics implicit in the knowledge/power equation. Bochner’s position can be interpreted to mean that self-writing can be contentious, with “illegitimate knowledges” asserting at right to legitimacy, but such
contention is difficult to manage in an context in which knowledge is mediated by politics as well as cultural norms.

The lack of habit of reflective self-observation and the habituated distrust of the personal voice in the scientific context has rendered the methodology of autoethnography suspect in the eyes of some, and this is especially the case where material science and social science might lack harmony in interpretation of the meaning of ‘science’. When the human, collectively or individually, becomes the subject of ‘scientific’ inquiry at the level of honouring experience, as is the case with social science, the mistrust of self as a tainter of ‘pure’ knowledge becomes problematic. This is contrasted with the esoteric tradition, within which ‘self’ is the only source of knowledge. As de Quincey argues, in the study of nature of consciousness, self “exists only as choice”, as the foundational agency of knowing/being (2000 pp. 99,100). The extent to which the metaphysical becomes philosophical, and then political in the validation of knowledge remains an ongoing problem that both promotes and impedes self-reporting as a valid way of knowing. The ultimate problem of self-writing not being ‘scientific’ in the conventional meaning of the term may have something to do with the fact that a lived life is not a scientific endeavour, nor necessarily a rational or reasoned one, and in the face of the innumerable complexities and unknowns that impinge upon the lived experience, perhaps the objectives of mutuality and compassion ultimately override the scientific desire for knowledge that seeks to deliver a purely intellectual understanding. A more holistic approach, accepting self as a multi-dimensional presence, seems to be needed. Within such the intellect is a member of an ensemble, whose members may ‘star’ in given contexts.

An important criticism is that self-writing often arises in consequence of crisis and while self-reflection on the crisis is an essential part of the process of personal restoration, it is particularly unreliable and potentially self-indulgent. As Holt (2003) says “It appears that criticisms of narcissism are common because autoethnographies are considered too self-indulgent, introspective and individualised.” (p. 15). Crisis may precipitate the necessity of self-reflection, but the absence of habit and ease of practice, may rob the process of both elegance and insight, and hence any merit. Self-reporting on self can also carry a certain conflict of interest that manifests as a mutuality of concern to temper, edit and censor the report. The absence of a prior habit of self-reflection and the lack of genuine self-awareness can result in mythologised accounts. Beginning with the notorious unreliability of memory, further complications arise when traumatic experience is recalled and the subject sees the prospect of discharging the unresolved content in a way that may not serve the broader sense of ‘truth’. Walford (2004) adds a further caution, considering the therapeutic nature of self-writing, saying that there is “only minimal concern shown about the potential dangers of untrained pseudo-therapists.” (p. 412) While the self-reflective and therapeutic aspects of self-writing are undoubted, how that translates in academic writing may be problematic in some instances. But the presence of problems does not detract from the greater overall potential.
Autoethnography exhibits both strengths and weaknesses at this stage of its evolution as a methodology, but it reflects the uncertainties implicit in qualitative inquiry and represents a superior opportunity to engage with the direct voice of the experienter. When the cautions are taken into consideration and are able to influence the quality of self-writing the strengths of the direct voice are potentially unmatched. The trend appears to be towards competence self-critical and self-aware reportage of experience that fully honours individual meaning making as a contributor to a shared discourse.

Richardson & Adams St Pierre offer criteria for assessing what they call CAP (creative analytical processes) Enthno
graphy, a writing style “wherever the author has moved outside conventional social scientific writing”, along with autoethnography are relevant here. This is not alternative or experimental writing but “valid and desirable representations of the social.” (2005 p. 962). The four criteria are:

- **Substantive contribution** - “does it contribute to our understanding of social life. Does this piece seem “true” – a credible account of the a cultural, social individual or communal sense of the “real”?  
- **Aesthetic merit** – “Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex and not boring?”  
- **Reflexivity** – “Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure...”  
- **Impact** – “Does it generate new questions or move me to write?” (2005 p. 962)

While I appreciate these criteria I see that they also echo Ellis’s perception of the degree of difficulty, while adding a further problematic demand for aesthetic merit, which runs the risk of over specifying, and of being overly demanding. It might be argued that the presence of genuine reflexive thought that has impact and is a substantive contribution should be sufficient, without demanding aesthetic appeal as well. Readability, in the sense of coherence and clarity is vital, but the aesthetic quality may be lacking, and should not detract from the merit of the work, though it may diminish the reader’s enjoyment. If applied to conventional academic writing there would be much that fails this criterion, so it is difficult to see why it might be specifically applied to non-conventional works. It should not be a compensation for the discomfort of innovation.

The management of the cautions versus the benefits lies at the level of authorship and subsequent review and refinement before a text is made available for reading. Given Ellis’s observations about the difficulties, we may conclude that this is a methodological work in progress, whose merits as knowledge may not always be matched by aesthetics.

The uncertainties about knowledge, about voices, about meanings that disrupt the old standard of ‘factual’ scientific knowledge getting are nowhere more keenly observed than in the problems of personal memory and interpretation of experience. What is ‘factual’ at any stage on the continuum from experience to memory is always problematic. If the goal of knowledge is to enhance
understanding then experience, as reported or recalled, provided it adheres to rules of conduct that are transparent to the reader, may represent a composite narrative with a central coherent and valuable theme.

Self-writing is not history writing. It is not a means by which an event can be recorded and reproduced. All that can be achieved is the report of the experience of an event, or the report of the consequence of the experience of the event as it lives within the psyche as an engine that drives contemporary experience. Bochner puts the matter succinctly “So the question is not, “Does my story reflect my past accurately?” as if I were holding a mirror to my past. Rather I must ask, “What are the consequences my story produces? The crucial issues are what narratives do, what consequences they have, to what uses they can be put”. (2000 p. 746).

If we go back to Richardson & Adams St Pierre and their fourth criteria of “impact”, this can be extended to more than generating a desire to write – to include reflection and thought that may influence conduct other than writing.

Bochner also offers a powerful line of thought on what these uses or conducts might be. He reminds us that the goal of social science is not simply knowledge, but knowledge with utility: “The goal is to encourage compassion and promote dialogue … for better conversation in the face of all the barriers and boundaries that make conversation difficult … The text is used, then, as an agent of self-understanding and ethical discussion” (2000 p. 748).

Here Bochner is stepping away from ‘science’, offering a ‘fuzzy’ kind of usefulness, wrapped in its own complexities and contingencies. Knowledge of a rational scientific kind is only a partial outcome of engagement with a narrative. The emotional impact of knowledge, through exciting empathy, is an equally legitimate outcome. One is here reminded of Bailey’s inclusion of love and intention in the search for knowledge.

The complexity of human experience is such that history is unreliable as an absolute statement of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’, but it does serve the necessary human need for stories about how and why things happened. We might assert, fairly, that all memories and all histories are creation myths, but we seem to need creation myths. Clendinnen (2006) sums up the problem in the title of her essay The History Question, who owns the past? She sees that the role of the historian is to “unscramble what actually happened from whatever the current myth may be, and to inquire into what the myth-makers are up to … (p. 46). She says that “...in human affairs there is never a single narrative. There is always one-counter story and usually several...” (p. 3). While Clendinnen goes on to say that in a democracy we might get to hear the other stories, our individual memory/histories do not function within a democracy, but usually as a tyranny of one. We can never be sure, indeed, we can almost be
certain, that any counter-stories are never told in full. But while what actually happened has value in that reflective cyclical and creative sense Broomfield (1997) sees as making history constantly retold, the other side of the coin in the perception and belief of what happened – because this is what makes history, even if the perceptions are mistaken and the belief erroneous.

The drama of experience, with all its misinterpretations and misapprehensions, can tell us much about the inner ‘reality’ that becomes the basis for action. Bocher’s sense that compassion is a valid outcome of inquiry suggests that not only the ‘facts’ of what actually happened are important, but the fallible responses that may explain subsequent conduct must also be understood.

Autoethnography presents an opportunity to step outside the tyranny of the single narrative, to the dyad of a dialogue. Here the reporter is extending the potential meaning that can be derived from an experience as an insider/insider partnership that offers qualitatively different potential to the outsider/insider partnership of separate reporter and reportee. There are merits in both.

In the final analysis there is a contest of discourses that may be resolved as a contest of ideas to be engaged with dispassionately, weighing up the virtue of assertion and argument. Do my questions, interpretations and propositions have stand-alone intellectual merit? However the soul of this research is the dramatic tension generated by disruptive personal experience, and how that flows into an engagement with cultural discourses as knowledge and belief systems. An ethnographic writer, rather than an autoethnographic writer, tackling the same theme has to manage the relationship between self as reporter and the self that is reporting, differently, where both are unknown, unfamiliar to the other. This brings in a different set of cautions and constraints. How skilled might the ethnographic writer be in eliciting the deeper detail of personal experience? How trusting is the reporting self who is not managing the process of revelation and recording? How knowledgeable is the writer – do they know enough to know what is valuable information and what is not?

The cautions of autoethnographic writing must be taken as a burden of duty by the writer to disclose the potential pitfalls, far more than it must be shouldered by the reader as they engage with the text. This places the duty of rigour upon the author at the stage of the creation of the text, and not upon the reader. Nevertheless the reader has an obligation to not anticipate from the text more than the author has released into it, at least in so far as the reader intends to hold the author accountable for what is written. The reader is free to make of the text what they will, but the extent to which they hold the writer accountable should not exceed the burden of duty.

The autoethnographic approach enables the resolution of the drama of individual response and discovery to be blended with the effort to formalise and structure thinking processes from the insider
perspective. The esoteric theistic orientation of the researcher brings a harmony with the subject matter such that there is a dialogue that can happen at a level of familiarity not possible by any other method.

**Application of Methodology**

Within the constraints discussed above concerning the application of phenomenological hermeneutics the principle shape of the research involves two main elements:

1. Review of personal experience and the response to the ontological crisis precipitated by the intrusive and disruptive non-ordinary phenomena, also later personal experience in the engagement with intentional non-ordinary experiences through training and working with several esoteric systems. This data is re-interpreted in the light of cultural analysis.

2. The present position as a researcher engaged in interpretation of texts – and a wider hermeneutic interpretation – informed by past engagement with texts as part of training in the esoteric traditions and in wider readings as part of the past effort to interpret my experiences. The texts were chosen from scientific, ethnographical, historical; philosophical, cultural and other fields, as well as from a diverse range of esoteric and related material with the object of articulating a rational pathway through intellectual territory that contains fragmentary and residual evidence of the possibility of an alternative valid narrative.

**Personal experience**

By good fortune I have preserved volumes of journals and diaries as well as other writings that span almost two decades of inquiry. These volumes became a private touchstone that charted the personal journey. They have been carried mostly unread half way around the world and back again.

The personal journals in three volumes are now moving reminders of the depth of dislocation and the great difficulty I experienced in achieving a progressive orientation to my inquiry. The diaries that relate to my study and work with formal and informal groups engaged in ritual magic provide specific records of non-ordinary events as well as regular records of personal engagement with ideas and reflection on emotional responses.
Later experiences also involved my partner, who also kept written records. Also because some experiences were highly significant to both of us, they have become part of our shared narrative. It has been our habit to ‘debrief’ intensively after events and experiences. We have often revisited experiences, reviewing them in the light of later knowledge or insights. This has been particularly important when revisiting the disruptive experiences that affected each of us differently, but no less powerfully.

I have memories also, but not memories in isolation, not in an album, rather ones that are retold regularly because they constitute the ground upon which my life experiences have worked out. These are only tentatively presented as evidence, not as pure recollection of what happened, but as narrative threads that have evolved over time in the retelling. Where memory and written record do not match exactly I have let the disharmony stand as testimony to the frailty of recall.

The cautions that are implicit in autoethnography – the potential for distortion, censorship and the absence of a well-practised habit of disciplined self-reflections are, I think, somewhat diminished here, because:

- I have an established practise in self-reflective writing through my journals and diaries.
- The diary records and other writings related to my participation in groups come from a culture of experience, recording, reflection and review.
- I write fiction, including short stories based upon personal experience, so I have some conscious sense of when self-writing moves into the fictional or self-indulgent.
- I am in a relationship a person who is a psychotherapist and family and relationship counsellor. As a consequence the habitual internal discourse within the relationship has tended to be more critical and self-reflective than might otherwise be the case.

**Literature**

As a consequence of my early investigative reading, despite its lack of clear direction and discipline, was that I tended to mine each book for personal significance – “What can this book tell me about what I am going through?” On one level this has developed an unfortunate habit of paying less attention to overall content, but on another it has meant that the literature has been engaged with at a deep level and with an interest in personal utility.

Subsequent readings, once I became engaged in structured study and practice, tended to relate readings to utility, meaning and coherence within a practice regime, and review (rereading to match
against practice and experience). A substantial portion of my personal library, therefore, comprised handbooks and practice guides that were engaged with at a critical level and in a heuristic cycle of reading, practice and review.

My training in formal methods of meditation, visualisation and ritual and allied experience, plus engagement with literature provides a useful ground from which to critique the literature employed in this thesis.

This ‘insider’ perspective has several advantages:

- There is a deep familiarity with ideas at the level of direct personal experience that can bring a new or alternative perspective to texts.
- Ideas that may not, in their context, appear to the author to be of significance, can be identified as key or ‘big’ ideas because I am able to relate them to other ideas in a context not available to the author. Often an observation made seemingly in passing will strike me as an exciting clue because its meaning, when applied to a different context, radically inflates to assume significance beyond the author’s apparent original intent.

I have also read widely for this research, but not always usefully, other than, perhaps, to eventually exclude certain things from the process of inquiry as examination rendered them less useful than they first promised to be. The problem of containment of the inquiry within a manageable frame has been ongoing, so absences also constitute evidence of a process of persistent refinement, rather than dismissal of the content.

A fundamental problem of engaging personal experience not accommodated by the dominant cultural narrative is that potential guides, inspirers and mentors do not gather under a single roof, or clump together like a posse at ready call. Supporting evidence is present at different levels, in varied discourses and across diverse fields. The active presence of voices dissenting from the dominant cultural narrative reflects a dynamic and energetic habit of contention that has progressed Western culture along its present trajectory towards consideration of complexities and uncertainties.

Do these voices have a common thread? Taken together do they constitute a chorus with genuine apparent harmony or a disgruntled cacophony that is music only to the discontented ear? In my struggle for meaning and identity the dissenting voices are natural sources of potential guidance.

Over all the review of literature has been synthetic, demonstrating that no singular field is, of itself, a sufficient source of content in the construction of an ontology. The spectrum from Positivism to
Constructivism that I argued to be present in my thinking demonstrates the difficulty, in a complex and multi-layered culture, of constructing a genuinely integrated world-view.

**Chapter outlines**

In the following chapters I have sought set forth a process of inquiry that constitutes my responses to the key questions of this thesis. This process of inquiry is not presented as a ‘solution’ in any universal sense, rather charts my own efforts to find a ‘reasonable’ explanation for what I had experienced.

**Chapter Two** - Mounting evidence of something incomprehensible and how the dominant discourses of my culture’s ontology failed to offer explanation.

In this chapter I recount several other profoundly disruptive experiences and look at how I engaged with, or rejected, the available explanatory systems in an effort to find meaning. I review past and current reflections on possible explanatory systems, with a particular emphasis on scientific and psychiatric thought, and how that has evolved, and may yet evolve, towards more accommodating knowledge systems.

**Chapter Three** - What is Animism and why has it apparently re-emerged as a knowledge system?

In this chapter I describe how I discover that the essential ideas of animism are surprisingly present in my experiences, my involvement with esoteric groups and in my secular life, and how animism becomes focus of interest. I also inquire into the nature of animism and consider how the term is presently thought about and employed.

**Chapter Four** - An exploration of animistic ideas in the contemporary Western world

In this chapter I look at apparent evidence that the essential ideas of animism appear to be present in the contemporary Western world, and seem to permeate it. Whether an idea, of a way of thinking, has been eradicated or subsumed is important because elimination supposes total absence, whereas ‘rebadging’ or absorbing into discourses and narratives as an unconscious component represents a difference degree of disappearance. The implications for how we might think about Animism are different, depending on how we perceive what has happened to it.
Chapter Two

Mounting evidence of something incomprehensible and how the dominant discourses of my culture’s ontology failed to offer explanation.

I have selected three experiences to illustrate the impact of radical non-ordinary phenomena on my life. While they are some of the more dramatic instances of a substantial body from which to draw illustrations, they have been selected not for their implicit dramatic attributes but because they constituted profoundly disruptive and challenging events that assailed my sense of the real. They also constitute signal experiences, in that after each I was forced to undertake a re-evaluation of my life. The first two (ML, from Chapter One, and WM, following) involve unwitting and unwilling participants that are a marked contrast with the last, involving my partner (PJ), who was the primary focus of the phenomenon and I, the more passive secondary participant.

The reactions of my co-experiencers had a strong impact upon me, precipitating, in the instances of ML and WM, rejection from their companionship and friendship. In the last, as a secondary participant I found myself in the reverse position, supporting another person distressed by what had happened and while having to deal with my own reactions.

The more disruptive paranormal experiences began in the latter part of 1970, culminating in the ML experience, which marked the commencement of an intense series of radical and disruptive experiences that ended with the WM episode, recounted next. This then precipitated an intense period of intellectual, spiritual and emotional turmoil of a largely solitary nature that ended in 1978, at the commencement of the PJ experiences, the last of the three accounts. The period between the WM and PJ experiences was an
intense engagement with religious and rational paradigms as I sought to make sense of what had happened to me, and this period is explored subsequently.

The WM Incident

This incident is drawn from memory. It was so dramatic that it has been the subject of an unpublished short story drafted in several versions.

Following the ML encounter I removed to Adelaide where I hoped that a new location would contribute to a cessation of the non-ordinary phenomena. In Adelaide I had my first encounter with the Theosophical Society. This encounter raised the possibility of access to a substantial body of thought that dealt precisely with the kind of things I was experiencing. However rather than this being a grateful entry, at last, into a domain of succour and comprehension I experienced even more disruption. After about seven months in Adelaide I was feeling emotionally and intellectually exhausted. I had been writing to a school friend and bush walking companion who was nursing at the Royal Derwent Hospital, a psychiatric facility, in New Norfolk, Tasmania. WM was an avowed sceptic and atheist and was, then, scathingly intolerant of any discussion on any matter that was not rational. I now craved his company, hoping that escaping all reference to the non-ordinary would be a balm. We agreed to spend a few weeks camping and walking. I had told him nothing of what I had been experiencing.

Our plan was to head up the east coast of Tasmania to camp, walk and fish, and on the first day we drove to the Freycinet Peninsula, to a bay not far from Coles Bay, but on the ocean side. This was a rugged place with high granite hills to the immediate south and right on the relentless ocean, whose energy surged against the precipitous granite inclines. We camped on a flat sandy area with a few trees and a shallow creek that flowed into the ocean not far from our tent. The easiest place to get water was a short distance inland where the creek flowed around a large granite boulder and over a stone lip, beneath which was a small pool deep enough to accommodate a billy. Close on dusk I went to get water for the evening meal. As I neared the pool I could feel an intense sense of presence but tried to dismiss it as mere indulgence in the eeriness of the place that was emphasised by the deepening shadows of dusk. I had been to the pool several times before with no adverse response. Nevertheless I had to force myself not to run on return. By the time we had eaten it was dark and it was WM’s turn to fetch water to wash up and make tea. When he came back he seemed to be rattled and agitated, but he said nothing.

As we sat around the campfire drinking tea and chatting both of us became aware that something was moving around us. For me it was a sense of movement just beyond the range of the campfire’s light. It seemed like a fast moving shadow of indeterminate size and shape, almost lost in the growing dark, yet
somewhat perceptible. There was no noise. We agreed it must be a dog and several times, on signal, we sprang up with our flashlights in an effort to catch sight of it, but to no avail. It was distracting and we decided to turn it because the conversation was becoming strained by our unwilling and uneasy pre-occupation with what ever it was. Inside the tent we both saw movement around the tent and between the tent and fire, silent. It was a dark form and definitely far larger than a dog, but still with no discernible form, even so close. Unexpectedly, and with one accord we lost our nerve, hastily bundled up the tent and its contents and scrambled up the embankment to the car. We fled to the camping ground at Coles Bay leaving a good deal of our gear behind. In the morning early we returned to collect what had been left behind and then decided to head further north. During it all WM said nothing, though he was plainly disturbed by what had happened. I remained true to my undertaking and made no effort to engage him in discussion. I knew WM well enough. If he wanted to talk about it, he would.

What had we experienced? Was it, as we had first thought a dog, maybe hungry but too untrusting to come close to our camp? Later, in the tent, what had we seen move between the tent and the fire, casting the shapeless shadow? WM and I were both experienced bushwalkers and we had walked together several times in the southwest wilderness. We were not easily spooked by strange things in the night. That night, though, what we saw might have subsequently surrendered its mystery to rational explanation, but we both did something uncharacteristic. We fled in the middle of the night in undignified haste and disarray into the safety of a camping ground. We did so with almost wordless accord. The believer and the sceptic both apprehended, at some shared visceral level, a sense of threat beyond willing tolerance.

There is a disturbing, and more telling, sequel to this adventure.

We left Coles Bay the next day, eager to be away from the place that had so disrupted our plans for a relaxing time. We had not travelled far north when the car alarmingly and suddenly swerved across the road and came, mercifully, to a halt on a flat under some trees. We had hit nothing save some small deadwood. WM confessed that he had blacked out momentarily and this greatly distressed him. He then said he had intrusive thoughts that something or someone was out to ‘get me’ and he wanted no part of it. He drove in silence back to Hobart and ejected me from the car with the warning to stay away from him. I was left standing bewildered by the roadside. We did not meet again for over a decade.

I had no sense of threat, no sense of anything ‘out to get me’. I knew WM well enough to know that he took great pride in his rationality. He was also a courageous companion in whose company I had always felt safe, knowing he would not ‘bottle out’ when things got tough. That was always how it had been before. What had happened? I did not know whether WM suffered from any physical ailment that might cause him to black out without warning, but supposed that might be possible. Would he have told me? I did not know. How could I account for his bizarre claim to have perceived that something was ‘out to get me’? Coming from my deeply sceptical friend this was unsettling. Did he, in saying it, fear he was going
mad? Did he believe it? Was it symptomatic of the same thing that caused the black out? I left Tasmania and returned to Melbourne.

WM’s sober sceptical demeanour was severely challenged by what he had experienced. He chose not to engage with what had happened. I met him in Queensland some 15 years later. It was a brief meeting. When I told him of my interest in the occult, he asserted his disinterest. He was clearly uncomfortable with me and we parted, with mutual disappointment. WM’s unwillingness to engage with or explore what had happened reflected the degree to which the subject matter generated reaction among those who saw themselves ‘rational’. He had been there. It was a shared experience. He had put up a barrier, dissolving a friendship and firmly drawing a line between what may or may not inhabit his ontological construction. After 15 years I was less reactive against such rejection, but the confirmation of the death of what had been a close friendship nevertheless underlined the degree to which my experiences had been, and continued to be, estranging.

Psychic attack

There was one experience that could possibly be construed as something ‘out to get me’ It was the only time, at that stage, that I had felt in distinct danger. Some weeks before I left Adelaide to travel to Tasmania to meet WM I had an experience that was described to me as a “psychic attack” by a member of the Theosophical Society. It is not, apparently an uncommon ordeal.

Late one evening, I was sitting on my bed about to go to sleep when I felt surrounded by a dense and malign atmosphere and seemed to close in on me. I feared harm if it succeeded and I held it at bay by force of will. Then I knew none of the various means of self-defence or mantras to keep the mind safely focussed. I spent the night, until first light, repeating the only thing I knew, the Lord’s Prayer. Even so there were times when my mind went blank I could do no more than repeat “Our Father…” over and over until recall returned. Eventually the sense of malignant presence dissipated as the sun came up.

Aside from this single encounter I felt no enduring sense of threat and was surprised and dismayed by WM’s assertion. Even now I am not prepared to say that I agreed with him. He did black out and the car did veer off the road. I accept that such had never happened to him before and I have no idea if it has since. I have to accept that for a deeply sceptical Mental Health worker to admit to me he had intrusive thoughts of this kind had to be extremely unusual. His subsequent conduct confirmed that he, at least, absolutely believed that he was at risk if he remained in my company. I should be grateful, perhaps, that I was not immediately ordered from the vehicle and left stranded on the east coast, from where, I knew from past experience, hitching a ride back to Hobart would have been difficult.
By then I was extremely emotionally disoriented even shattered and contemplated returning myself to psychiatric care, just to get some respite. I even contemplated taking psychotropic medication. In despair and frustration I called out and demanded that these bizarre events stop, and, strangely, they did. For the next nearly five years I was mercifully free of strongly disruptive phenomena. I had a steady stream of comparatively mild experiences, mostly intuitions that were consistently and helpfully reliable. However, on a personal level I had been damaged and I became determined to make sense of what had been happening. I read voraciously but in an undisciplined way, anything that seemed it might provide some explanation.

Both the ML and WM experiences concerned unwilling participants in radical events. Neither was aware of my situation, so neither had the opportunity to collaborate in any subjective or delusional activity in which I might have been engaged. The ‘dog’ incident with WM was a genuinely shared experience, with neither of us anticipating any of what happened. While it was a dramatic illustration of what might be a called an encounter with the spirit of a place, it was the second part of the drama, WM’s blackout and intrusive thoughts that displayed a compelling similarity with ML’s experience. Both had been unwilling participants in something that they said, related directly to me. In neither case did I share their direct experience. It was as if I were being given evidence that whatever was going on was not a product of my ‘madness’.

The emotional toll on me was immense. For the next five or so years, during which time I had been keeping journals, I was preoccupied with making sense of what had happened. The respite from disruptive experiences was welcome, but my journals reveal deep intellectual and emotional turmoil.

**Intentional encounters with a willing participant**

In March 1977 I left Tasmania and travelled to Sydney with the intent of staying briefly before heading west. However, I met people with a mutual interest and became involved in studying astrology. A new chapter in my life was about to start.

In December 1977 I met my partner (PJ) and we quickly discovered a mutual interest in things of a non-ordinary nature. She had some equally disruptive and disturbing experiences, and was vaguely aware that there were groups in Sydney with whom we might undergo some learning and training. We set out to discover one. I had also met a woman who styled herself as a witch and she agreed to provide some introductory education to us, including some basic rituals. It was immediately after the very first ritual that things took a surprising turn.
After we had finished the working, which we had conducted in PJ’s lounge room, PJ had gone to the toilet. I heard a massive “crack” and my immediate thought was that she had fallen against the oak dining table and broken it. She was a bit ‘spun out’ when she had left the room. I rushed to see the anticipated disaster and found her, instead, standing dazed by the door to the bedroom and I helped her on to the bed. As we both sat on the bed trying to discuss what happened the room seemed to fill up with an intense energy. She seemed to enter a trance-like state and I stayed, struggling, for full consciousness. At her insistence, I found a pen and paper and she scrawled in a poor hand the first words of contact with a spirit entity with whom we would subsequently work for a number of years. The following is an excerpt from volume one of my magical diaries. I have changed my partner’s name.

Saturday night - Middle pillar ritual. Extraordinary powerful. I went to sleep for most part, All very happy & positive. After effect potent- whole house charged up. PJ went through auto writing – resisting full effect. Energy came upon us while we were sitting in the bedroom. PJ’s hand took up pen and proceeded to scrawl with some difficulty line which yielded no immediate apprehension of their significance, if any.

There was a great deal of force upon PJ & I sitting close by felt the force of its energy. I watched PJ quite motionless and seeming under a gentle command to be sit (sic).

After awhile the pen is dropped form PJ’s hand in apparent frustration. PJ then falls back into a trance-like state and proceeds to scrawl forms with her right hand. She is directed to Steiner’s Great initiates – section on same.

I played a passive role in the whole affair. Such was the benevolent aura the (sic) enveloped the energy I felt no sense of concern or worry for PJ.

I think on Friday night PJ was zapped & sent reeling back from the back door. B&I heard loud bang at that time (we were sitting in lounge room) when I met her (PJ) in the doorway she was proceeding to collapse backwards, I supported her onto the bed.

(Magical Diary Vol 1, 26 /2/78)

The second incident was similar. My recollection is that we were heading out of the house intending to go to a movie but as we neared the front door we were surrounded by an intense energy field, similar to the first, but considerably more potent. The same pattern of hesitant and barely legible writing occurred. What was represented here was a different entity, one whose presence, and our subsequent involvement with, was deeply problematic. My experience was that of being subjected to an intensely energetic influence within which I struggled to maintain consciousness and found co-ordinated movement quite difficult. In both instances the experience of a palpable radiation was remarkable because it added a shared experience dimension to what might otherwise have been no more than a case of my partner entering a trance-like state with no indication to me that might have been other than her own subjective or physical manifestation of even a pathological condition. Again the magical diary record is slightly different:

Report of events Monday 19/2/79. Evening time about 6.45. PJ and I were about to go out to movies (Fellini’s Casanova). We were taking our ease over coffee & Dr Who (TV) when
PJ reported a particularly strong urge to write. I gave her pen & paper and quelled protestations that it was not a good time.

Some initial squiggles & spirals. I asked PJ to ask who it was. The response was P. I asked PJ to ask the entity the name and number of our teacher. (The response was accurate). I asked what the entity required. (a question and answer session followed). (Magical Diary Vol 1, 21/2/79)

I was taught that a safety precaution when dealing with discarnate entities is to require them to give a name and a number if they claim to be teachers or guides. Those who are familiar with the magical system will know that names and numbers have esoteric significance. In this case the first entity became a teacher to us and I recorded many pages of transcribed conversation, although several dozen tapes (now lost) remained untranscribed. In the second instance the entity P could have been mischief and asking him the name and number of our teacher was a way of assuring that he was not. It also was a way of determining whether he was familiar with the magical tradition. The difference between what I recorded and what I recall illustrates the problems of memory in terms of detail, but not in terms of the essential event.

These two experiences precipitated an ontological crisis in both of us, but with differing foci. Who or what were these entities and why were they intruding into our world and seeking communication with us? For PJ, as the primary experiencer these questions were vital at the personal level. She was the one acting out the apparent communication. She was worried. Had she precipitated some bizarre psychotic drama? As a witness and a passive participant my questions were less personally urgent. Something was happening, but what was it? Both times I experienced a seeming external source of radiant energy that engulfed both of us, and within which I had struggled to remain alert and focused. I did not think I was witnessing PJ acting out any kind delusional drama. We had similar questions: “What was going on here?” and “Why us?”

Some of these questions were answered by degrees over the following years. I recorded a great deal of material as the entity spoke through PJ, at first with great difficulty and then, progressively with greater ease and fluency. I transcribed a number of the tapes, but only a small portion of the total. It was a slow and tedious business and life events drove on with other fascinating and challenging experiences, both mundane and supramundane.

Even though explanations were forthcoming PJ experienced tremendous difficulty in accepting what was happening and her willingness to explore the phenomenon diminished and eventually departed. She was having her own intense difficulties and I was left with half answered questions and many more unanswered. These ‘contact’ experiences had taken us outside the realm of ‘normal’ occult investigation, so much of the literature that had been helpful ceased to be useful. There seemed to be another level of meaning beyond the accessible material. Our association with several formal occult teaching groups became fraught, and we found ourselves alone. We learned that there were politics associated with such
things and that in the view of those who ran the groups what was happening to us was outside their scheme of things and disruptive to the way they wanted things to go.

From my perspective what had held promise as a source of knowledge, training and fellowship had gone, and I was left in a somewhat solitary situation. PJ was dealing with her own drama, and I needed to work through mine. I did not have the answers I wanted. While we shared the experiences, from differing perspectives, our responses and personal challenges were distinct, with powerful individual foci, rather than a shared one.

**Reflecting on the various interpretive options open to me**

These recounted experiences represented critical steps in displacement from the shared ontological frames of my culture, and the movement towards seeking an alternative ontological construction.

Could I accept the diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia? I did not feel mad. The voices were maddening – unwanted, uninvited and incomprehensible – but otherwise I had no personal sense of disordered thinking. The unwillingness of psychiatry to discuss or explore what was happening to me, to merely observe apparent evidence of insanity, was frustrating and disempowering. The solution of medication as a lifelong means of controlling the voices was not a palatable or acceptable option. If that was all that psychiatry could offer me then I would have to find another way.

Could I accept the easy proposition that the voices were just as they were – beings attempting to communicate with me? Nothing I knew enabled me to accept such a proposition. I had then no sense of cultural heritage that accommodate the voices. Nothing in my learning made their reality a plausible proposition. I rejected the acceptance of the prospect of an invisible, populated and interactive realm on sound methodological grounds. It was not possible to subject such experiences to structured and disciplined inquiry and so I could not admit them into the realm of what could be known and asserted as real. But they had happened. Furthermore they had happened in company, so I could not discount them as purely personal experiences that might be safely put down to momentary aberrations that were misperceived and misconstrued. Even within the domain of shared experience the possibility of misperception and misinterpretation could not be ruled out. I speculated as to whether I could accept the proposition that there were non-ordinary or paranormal phenomena.

By the time of the PJ experiences I had a history of serial non-ordinary experiences, of both disruptive and gentle natures, and by now serial experience that incorporated both shared encounters and events that had distinctive utility were obliging me to deal with the proposition that there had to be an ontological frame
that accommodated them as bona fide, not as malfunctions and misperceptions. Further more any explanation had to be reasonable and rational, and not merely in the guise of occult literature, whose surface rationality betrayed an underlying reliance on 'givens' that were not understood.

Direct experience of the milder non-ordinary phenomena did not present any significant challenges to my sense of being within my culture, because, although they were not explicable by science, they were sufficiently common, and shared by others, as well as being not especially disconcerting. They could be explored and thought about as interesting mysteries. The disruptive experiences that generated significant personal distress were a different matter. Understanding them became urgent because they were presenting serious challenges to my wellbeing. I was at serious risk.

Exploring the discourses

From the time my disruptive experiences began to make my life a miserable and bewildering adventure I sought explanations from the two major discourses that collectively constituted a substantial portion of the foundation of the Western ontology – religion and science. This was all I knew. While my brief encounter with the Theosophical Society opened up some prospect of more, left to my own devices I returned to familiar territory.

There are two distinct phases to this process of inquiry, the early initial response that was an immediate effort to address the disruption and the shock I was experiencing, and a later, more thoughtful and mature, inquiry as my reading advanced and my capacity to engage in dialogue improved.

I have taken particular caution here to separate out the two stages and to avoid putting wiser words in the younger mouth.

The religious options, and initial response

My parents, my twin sister and I migrated to Australia in 1955 from Northern Ireland and moved, with an interlude on a farm near Coleraine, to Casterton in Western Victoria. My father came from a committed Protestant family and my mother, less committed, was nevertheless content that we became an active church-going family. In Casterton I was exposed to family life dominated by the faith, forced into Sunday school and later into Church. I was not natively a religious child and had to be enticed with threats to participate.
My father’s Irish Protestantism was steeped in dogmatism and intolerance. It was only after his death that I found he had re-joined both the Apprentice Boys and Orange Lodge within a few years of arriving. I was expected to be a compliant heir to his tradition. But in a new country, without the same intense history of religious division, and in a small country town, it was impossible for me to accommodate his monocultural isolationism. I went to school with Catholics and Anglicans, who were also friends. The choice between unreasoned loathing and friendship was easily made. My reality as a child was dominated by the need for acceptance and inclusion. If religion was not going to serve that need then it had no benefit for me.

Religion had also become an incomprehensible and unpleasant thing fervently practiced by the least pleasant adults who came into my life. Initially I was obliged to attend Sunday school where I was fascinated by a large picture of Jesus that dominated the room. Children were sitting on his lap and were all around him in a frozen clamour of attention seeking. He was happy and accepting. I have no recollection of sitting on my father’s lap and remember him as an emotionally remote and troubled man. I was later to learn that he was raised in an emotionally abusive family. The wall mounted Jesus seemed to offer a type of religious experience alien to my real life. It was an ideal that I was not able to experience. When I became too old for Sunday school I was taken off to church, which I remember as a place of unalloyed boredom, induced by the incomprehensible droning of the minister and the awful hymn singing, hypnotic dirges that I loathed with a deep passion.

When my parents separated I went with my mother and in our new life I asked her to release me from any obligation to go to church, and she assented. My new step-father was not, at that time, inclined to religion. He would later become a dedicated Pentecostal, and the family entered a new phase of a religion-drenched life.

At high school I had enough curiosity to sample the range of scripture classes on offer. I harboured a doubt about my rejection of faith. This sampling was not particularly edifying, but I had a spectacularly acrimonious interchange with an arrogant nun who, in response to a question now well forgotten uttered the indelible response “That’s for God to know and for you to find out.” I walked out determined to find out, whatever it was. But this determination took a back seat to an active childhood and early adolescence, besides I had no guidance in religion and knew of nothing outside Christianity.

Aside from some later attempts to read books on Christianity I had effectively dismissed religion, and Christianity in particular, from my life, so by the time of the experiences I not only saw no value in religion I had no motive at all for seeking guidance or succour from it.

However, although I had dismissed Christianity as a faith I had not eradicated the language, or the ideas. I remained intensely interested in the spiritual dimension. As I reviewed my journals I was struck by the
references to Christ and God. My sense of relationship with such ideas was beyond Christian-based thinking and much more metaphysical. Whilst in Hawthorn, Victoria, I wrote:

I ask myself how may a truth be free from error and I can only answer that it is of God’s making and not one of man’s making. A man may interpret the truth of God but unless he himself is free of the bonds of self he may never transmit a truth of God without altering its nature. (Personal Journal Vol 2, 9/6/75)

I can see the influence of reading in Zen here, in the idea of freedom from self. Later the entrenched habit of Christian influenced thought is still evident. On my birthday in 1977 in Zeehan, Tasmania, I wrote:

Do I believe in God now? In a God of my own image yes. In so far as God made man in his own image then I perceive God in my own image. I do not imply that the God who made me and the God I perceive are (the) same image. That they are the same God I do believe. Perhaps one day the two images shall mirror each and each shall say I am he – but one shall be the maker and the other the made. (Personal Journal Vol 2, 22/1/77)

These two excerpts reveal a continuing desire to make sense of the religious, yet, increasingly, a clear sense that what may be knowable and believable was very much a matter of what is constructed in the mind. Making sense of the idea of God had become a focal point of my life and this is reflected in the last entry of Volume Three of my journals, my last, in Balmain, Sydney I wrote:

The spiritual quest is all I have ever known it to be and rarely read it to be. It is anguish & struggle & it is not a smooth magical transition from ignorance to enlightenment … Spiritual enlightenment is not the simplistic acceptance of religious dogma. It is a far far greater thing. It is comprehending & living a fullness of being human on this planet in this time. (Personal Journal Vol 3, 24/10/79)

By 1978 I had begun a period of involvement with esoteric groups teaching and practicing ritual magic in the Western Mystery Tradition. The initial glamour of relief at discovering something that seemed to offer the promise of a rational and coherent system tarnished quite swiftly. A particular problem was the discovery that those with whom I became affiliated were significantly less driven in their passions than I was. I was still operating under an extreme sense of personal urgency and found it almost impossible to adjust to the more measured approach of the groups. Significant intellectual and ethical issues also emerged.

The science option, an initial response

From an early age I had a passionate questioning curiosity that drove my parents to distraction. My father gave up on me when I asked him why cows were different colours. I remember his exasperated response, which was to shape to give me a clip around the ears, save that my mother intervened. I was, in
consequence, provided with whatever knowledge-based books my mother could find. I was a voracious reader and serially exhausted various libraries of material at and above my reading age.

From year five I developed a passion for geology that culminated in an award of second prize in a science talent quest when I was in year 10. My teachers and parents presumed I was destined to study geology at university. It was an ambition that I was content to share. But I was a complete dunce at maths. In science I loved theory, but calculus of any nature seemed to defeat me utterly. Nevertheless I grew up with a love of science and a deep respect for scientific method. I was sceptical, but not a sceptic.

When I left home a little after I turned 17, I commenced working in the Taxation Office in Hobart. I spent a good deal of then meagre wage on periodicals, mostly related to photography, but I was an avid reader of Scientific American. I also read what more general books on science I could find in the State Library, and progressively developed an interest in science fiction, which, while not scientific, developed and maintained a speculative interest in technology and how it might be applied.

I was as imbued with the culture of the triumph of science and technology as one could be. I saw science as it was promoted, as purely rational truth seeking, a great intellectual adventure unravelling the mysteries of life and existence. It was a naïve perception that was just beginning to be shaken a little through my involvement in the campaign to save Lake Pedder. I had no involvement with medicine or psychiatry, so my anticipations in those fields were unformed.

When I began to have the invasive ‘voices’ I was initially curious and a little perturbed, and then eventually deeply perturbed. They had become increasingly frequent and more invasive and I did not want them. I sought psychiatric care in a naïve belief that psychiatry represented a reasonable and rational scientific approach to understanding human experience. I wanted to understand what was happening to me. I did not understand that I was mad because I did not credit the voices with any merit, and had been refusing to listen to them. I wanted help to get rid of them.

My encounter with psychiatry was disempowering and disappointing. Immediately on presentation and after a very brief description of my problem I was obliged to enter immediate in-patient care. I was not permitted to have any discussion with a psychiatrist and my determined efforts to do so resulted in a warning that I would be removed from the facility. I decided to be patient in the hope that something would change, but after a week I was given only a brief interview at which I was told I had been diagnosed as suffering from paranoid schizophrenia and that I would be taking medication for the rest of my life, and then dismissed.
I was struck by the remoteness between resident patients and staff and by the absence of any attempt to investigate my experiences, and yet arrive at a solution in the form of medication. I could not see the science here.

My brief experience of psychotropic medication was alarming. The medication, a phenothiazine marketed as Stelazine (trifluoperazine) did not actually remove the phenomenon, but what it did do was disable the capacity to react to it. Stelazine, as an antipsychotic or neuroleptic drug, works on the brain, and effects the nervous system, rather than on the relationship between the individual and the source of distress – other than the proposition that it was the brain itself that was the problem. If one is troubled by a non-existent biting dog, then calming the anxiety may be a sensible thing if the dog can be removed as well, but calming the anxiety while the dog is still biting can be terrifying on a different scale. In my case it was the phenomenon that bothered me, not the response. I thought my response sane and reasonable – I did not want the intrusion and could not make it go away unaided. All the medication did was leave me emotionally disengaged from the voices. I needed help to deal with what was, to me, a reality that was unwanted and intrusive. My cognitive processes were not disordered. I did not understand what madness meant to psychiatry, and psychiatry did not, in my encounter with it, understand what I wanted.

Outside of psychiatry I had no other sense of scientific involvement in my situation. Hence, for the time, while the disappointments of psychiatry waned, I could retain a comfortable anticipation that there was a scientific explanation. It would be a number of years before I returned to psychiatry as a subject of inquiry, reflecting back on my experiences and attempting to understand madness. By then I was motivated by concern that my involvement in magical and esoteric groups had exposed me to potentially delusional conduct and I discerned a need to develop a sufficient understanding of psychotic behaviour. This was partially self-protective and partially to better understand the people I was mixing with.

The struggle to remain true to my love of science and rational thought is reflected in my journals. In 1976, in Strahan, I wrote:

My head is going about a de-mystifying and a de-gloryfying. I am doubting and disposing some long held and long cherished beliefs. I am not discarding them utterly but more putting in their proper place as possibilities rather than knowledges. (Personal Journal Vol 2, 7/4/76)

Doubting seemed to be important to me. Earlier I had written:

Our dilemma is only our unwillingness to doubt sufficiently, to forget in our consciousness significant things. Our dilemma is what we call need, necessity. What it is that constitutes our “reality”. (Personal Journal Vol 2, 5/1/76)
This blended both the mystical sense of doubt and the rational sense of inquiry, but the activity of doubting was essentially reflective, rather than through acts of more ‘scientific inquiry. This is evident in my journal entry in March, 1976:

What it is I am yet to know. It seems inexpressible and unknowable yet oft it is expressed in fragments and knowable in fragments. If I chase it as fragments it is not for the sake of the fragments but for the sake of the whole. How, what and why is unanswerable though not quite unknowable.

(Personal Journal Vol 2, 15/376)

I was struggling. On Thursday 29 April 1976 in Strahan I noted: ”Information breeds (sic) more & doubts multiply along with possibilities. God knows when this confusion shall end.” (Personal Journal Vol 2)

The science/religion concern that dominated my thinking was expressed passionately and optimistically in a journal entry on Wed 23 April 1976, Strahan:

Our science draws nearer the lore of the magician yet is held from it by the cult of reason which shies from things sensible otherwise to a man whose head & heart are combined. We may yet see the day upon this world when the scientist priest is supreme. As yet the priest is bound from reason save it be cloaked in mystery and foolishness and similarly the scientist suffers the bonds of over reason. Between the two lies a realm wondrous which is narrowed in the passing of each year. (Personal Journal Vol 2)

**Philosophy**

I took to reading in philosophy in my first year away from home, with State Library conveniently located between home and work. By the end of the first year, before I turned 18 I had read through three volumes of Russell and one each of Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard. I also read a book on Greek philosophy and a compendium on Western philosophy. Though I found the philosophers fascinating they were also dense and dry, and without companionship to share the interest and stimulate further thought, I left them behind. They were, at the time, no useful source of practical assistance. I continued to read in books of a philosophical nature, but tended to be drawn to those whose influences were chiefly Eastern.

I don’t recall much of those readings save that I took a dislike to Russell, but nevertheless endured all the volumes of his autobiography, and I sufficiently objected to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason that I penned a lengthy rebuttal. It was, no doubt, complete naïve nonsense and at the time I had not the slightest sense of the arrogance of the act.

What I took from reading in philosophy was, chiefly, the sense of relief that ideas might be explored in depth, and that nothing stood, of itself, as a pure assertion of truth or fact. The diversity of my reading left
me with no clear sense of a personal philosophic position, other than the sense of excitement towards the possibility of thinking through things in a deep way. I was aware of my own ignorance, awed by the complexity of thought I had encountered. But none of the Western philosophers touched me as much as my reading of Paul Brunton’s Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga.

I had acquired this book at age 16 from a friend’s mother and it had taken me over 18 months to read it. As an exploration of Hindu metaphysics it seemed to me to possess a clarity and coherence that was not as evident in the Western tradition. I did not come across books of a similar nature for some years. There were certainly none in the library. In effect my reading in Western philosophy, while it excited my curiosity, came about only because I not find any follow up reading to Brunton. Whilst still at Matriculation College I had contacted the University of Tasmania to determine whether it was possible to study eastern metaphysics. It was not. My interest in going to university declined thereafter.

I rediscovered a copy of Brunton for the first time in January 2008. I could immediately see the distinction between the styles of writing. Brunton was not attempting formal philosophic thought, so the writing was far less formal, but no less stimulating. I briefly reread a portion of the book, realising that not much of it would have made a great deal of sense to me at the time. Perhaps the main appeal was the discovery of writing on deeper and spiritual matters that offered far more than my previous exposure to religious thought. Until then I was unaware of the existence of other religious ideas or of philosophy or philosophers. All I knew was religion, science and literature. I loathed the former, loved the next, and though I was a voracious reader of fiction (and non-fiction) I never quite took to English as a subject in high school.

In the absence of an environment in which philosophy was studied under guidance and with a disciplined and systematic approach the more formal nature of the works, and their density of thought, did not sit well with the more urgent personal sense of meaning making that drove me through the 1970s.

**Parapsychology – an early encounter**

I eventually found books on parapsychology and read many, though now I have no recall of which, save that they were, for the most part, in the form of popular literature, rather than scholarly works. What I recall were detailed and dry accounts of experimentation to demonstrate the reality of ‘psychic powers’, ghosts, poltergeists and the like. While I was prepared to be convinced with no great resistance, nothing I read offered me any kind of useful practical advice that related to what I was experiencing. Eventually, too, the books became repetitive and I lost interest.
Parapsychology did at least encourage me that there was some serious consideration of phenomena and ‘powers’ of the mind. I was also keenly aware that such research stood, at best, at the fringe of valid scientific investigation and that there was passionate objection to it from ‘proper’ science. I was less concerned with the ‘fringe’ nature of the studies than the fact that no amount of reading in the field advanced an understanding of my own position. I had ample demonstration from my own direct experience of the validity of the proposition that extra sensory perception was real, and I was generally willing to accept the ‘reality’ of the more spectacular powers such as telekinesis.

Outside the more dramatic accounts of research and the speculations on the nature of the phenomena, the recounting of finely controlled experiments demonstrating ‘better than chance’ instances of cognitive phenomena tended to suggest only that such phenomena manifested randomly and without any forms of control, save in some rare instances. This fitted with my own experience.

Chiefly I saw a clear distinction between the discipline of intentionally planned and conducted experiments that gave good data and kind of wild unexpected things that had been happening to me, with no prospect of applying scientific method in exploring their nature or validating their occurrence.

As my interest in magical and esoteric thought deepened parapsychology became less attractive as a specific field of inquiry, other than something I would occasionally look into out of curiosity to see what developments there were. It is perhaps significant that I had essentially forgotten to include it as an influence in my thinking until I was prompted to do so, and then recalled that I had actually read quite a bit on the subject.

**Other alternatives**

Up the time that I relocated to Adelaide and I encountered the poster advising of the Theosophical Society presentation I was reading as constantly as I could through borrowed books from friends, though now I have no recollection of what I read. I was, from childhood a voracious and fast reader, so I read for interest and distraction, both fiction and non-fiction.

The Theosophical Society opened up a whole range of possibilities as I became aware, for the first time, of an organised community of interest that might have the answers I was seeking. I did not, subsequently, form any connection with the Theosophical Society, largely because my lifestyle was erratic and mobile, and would be for some years to come. Also, at that stage my cultural orientation was distinctly ‘alternative’ and it did not fit well with apparent sober conservatism of the Society.
I came across individuals who were members of various informal groups with an interest in the occult and UFO, or who had joined any of the range of Eastern religious sects that had become popular. None appealed to me. I wanted some sense of sceptical rational inquiry, not easy acceptance of teachings and dogmas. While I had no interest in joining any of the groups I encountered I was happy to spend time talking with members, collectively and individually. I had a number of friends who had been attracted to missionary branches of various Indian religious movements and spent a good deal of time with them and their fellow adherents, but I could not be persuaded to join. Nevertheless I read their literature and participated in discussions. In some ways I envied their fellowship.

It would not be until 1978 that I became intensely involved with occult orders and esoteric schools.

**Confrontation between the astonishing and the rational – the sense of ontological crisis**

With the opportunity to review my journals from a research perspective I was struck by the swinging between enthusiastic response to new ideas and decline into a profound sense of spiritual and intellectual angst as it seemed that nothing I explored finally served the healing purpose I hope for. The period from the early 19070s to 1979 marked a profoundly difficult time as I worked through the dilemma of meaning. My almost mono-maniacal focus finding some resolution had led to the dissolution of my first marriage and the loss of close friends.

On Tuesday 25 (Jan) 1977, in Zeehan, I wrote:

> The fear of being invalid is a constant companion. It is not a matter of not being here, but a fear of being a fabrication – a process of not defining self but reinforcing self delusion – reinforcing the armour of deep seated – deep rooted suspicion – fear of what? Even now I cannot put it to words – it arises out of doubt & believing. I write frequently of vision – a vision of something a reality which fractures and in fracturing loses its omnipotence. Once shattered the vision must refine itself and once again become omnipotent. Who can tell what is shattered and how much is shattered. This is part of the necessary condition of experience. (Personal Journal Vol 3)

This was a low point, shortly after my 25th birthday, celebrated alone. I had not been able to resolve my experiences, even after nearly six years. Others experiences than these recorded here had added to the burden. The more I inquired into them the less I found answers, and what seemed to be happening was that doubts and inquiry were exacerbating my situation, rather than being a balm my sense of self. I didn’t feel authentic because I had no ground, no ontological foundation, and no assured sense of belief. I was
also pre-occupied with intellectual merit, writing that “Intellectual honesty and a consuming passion for understanding is the essence and not intellectual capacity.”(Personal Journal Vol 2, 11/6/75, Hawthorn).

My idea of vision was how one sees the world, and is all embracing, and all powerful. It is an ontology, a way of believing what is so and real. When it is shattered, as with radical non-ordinary phenomena, its power is broken, but one does not know what of the vision or how much of it is shattered. Only as one experiences the consequences does this become evident. The objective is to refine the vision, to rework the ontology until its power is restored.

What I was doing was becoming overly extreme and fixated. In 1975 I wrote:

I struggle with my eyes to see differently, with my ears to hear differently, with my voice to utter differently, my body to act and feel differently, my mind to perceive & conceive differently. All this to change according to my knowledge and my faith in my ability to enable my knowledge to grow untainted by base fears and prejudices. (Personal Journal Vol 2, 9/1/75)

Two years later when my first marriage had finally collapsed I record “Conversation with J today lead (sic) me to more attempts to make a comprehensible summary of my thoughts. I am thwarted by the apparent assumptions that appear and by the sheer magnitude of the scope that is necessarily covered.” (Personal Journal Vol 2 1/4/77, Tasmania). A short time later, on April 24, I wrote “I am well aware of the precarious situation within my own mind. It may be that I shall soon reach a crisis that will require a vast and strenuous effort to pull myself back onto my feet.” (Personal Journal Vol 2). The last paragraph for the same entry reflects the degree to which I had become determined to drive myself to a point of resolution. I wrote: “J’s repeated comment that what I am doing is ‘risky’ haunts me. That she should regard the degree of risk as a valid consideration for action surprises me.” I was surprised that she thought it was not worth the risk. I did not see I had an option.

The fact that I felt a persistent risk of inauthenticity arising from not being able to have a clear sense of intellectual or spiritual foundation was not helped by my interest in Eastern philosophies. In a journal entry dated May 17-18 Tues-Wed 1977 Sandy Bay Rd, I wrote:

I feel I have reached a crucial point in my thoughts upon the philosophies of life and how they are applicable to our culture without violent polarization. These thoughts are largely generated form my own discomfort and to a lesser degree an abiding fascination with the process of our civilization. Thinking upon Tao, Shinto & Zen have (sic) forced me to radical debates whose resolutions are yet more radical. (Personal Journal Vol 3)

This was written shortly before I left Tasmania in 1977, effectively marking the end of a particular chapter in my life. I had been attracted to these traditions, for their style of thought, but knew that I did not want to
adopt their full expression. I was happy to be influenced and inspired. The deep sense of connection with the natural world had powerful appeal to me, but I sensed that by becoming a devotee, as with any of the Indian sects, meant further particularisation of self, and marking myself as distinct, different. The more I internally debated their merits the less I could see them as fitting within my parent culture without precipitating stark polarisation, as was evident to me, most clearly demonstrated by my observations of the Hare Krishna movement. I knew several devotees, with whom I got on well on a personal level. I could not, however, share their sense of certainty and missionary zeal, or their sartorial extremes. While I had no desire to be invisible, I did not want to a starkly visible moving target. They stood in their certainty, their devotion to their beliefs. I had no certainty, not even the certainty of uncertainty.

Looking further afield and later reflections on the religious and scientific discourses

After I moved from Tasmania to Sydney my life quickly changed. The options open to me were far more substantial than my early level of awareness enabled me to grasp. Without the advantage of an overview, and on the basis of very limited knowledge I had pursued an idiosyncratic path of inquiry that eventually led me eventually into the Western Mystery Tradition and Wicca. While my involvement in the Western Mystery Tradition and Wicca was a time of rich and rewarding experience, neither of knowledge systems satisfied my need to find meaning that was comprehensible within wider cultural narrative. My entrenched aversion to belief and faith, born of my childhood Christian experience, caused me to chaff against the legitimate limits these systems had to offer. But here I began to develop a sense of rational and coherent structures. In particular study of the Kabbalah helped me see that it was possible to have a complex, coherent, sophisticated and intellectually challenging system. This was what, I realised, I had craved.

Both the Western Mystery Tradition and Wicca were fundamentally practice-based systems in which the theoretical elements reinforced the practice. They did not seem designed for intellectual inquiry and for speculation, indeed such was not only not supported, but, from my experience, actively discouraged. Certainly both had an experimental and exploratory side, but this was not evident in my initial encounters, wherein conformity and acceptance dominated.

The foundational knowledge was ‘given’ and came as highly specific ideas in a language peculiar to the system. This was, in essence, no different from learning physics or chemistry, but unlike foundational ideas of science, these knowledge systems did not provide a commonly accepted body of ideas that explained how the world worked in a way that satisfied my need for rational explanations. For the most part knowledge was imbibed and expressed within a discrete community of like-minded participants, many of whom were content operate within the limits of ‘privileged’ knowledge, which was, in any case,
often imparted with injunctions to secrecy. In practical terms the advantage of secrecy lay not in the risk of imparting knowledge that was privileged, but in not sounding like a complete idiot to an outsider to whom what was said was incomprehensible nonsense.

There were certainly controls on knowledge that had real regard to safety against ill-advised practice. As with any practice-based or empirical praxis, there are stages by which skills are developed and experiences undertaken. However the injunction against revealing what one learned did more to prevent contention and embarrassment than anything else, and this highlighted a particular problem for me. The ideas were not articulated in contemporary language, nor did they take account of contemporary developments in learning. It was entirely possible for a person with little education and learning to dedicate their time to the study of these knowledge systems with little equivalence by way of learning in the world. This limitation, that is a consequence of both degree of interest and ability as well as time, pointed up another major concern for me. Practice-based systems blend knowledge and narrative into a single discourse that does not need to be tested against external environments so long as it meets the needs of functionality and personal satisfaction. This means there is a risk of the development of a self-serving belief system that is reinforced by compliance and conformity. It can sit outside the cultural norm, self-perceived as superior to it. This does not contribute to the integration of disparate ontological elements into a shared narrative.

The groups with which I associated were structured on a traditional hierarchical system, with those holding senior offices possessing a higher degree of training in the various techniques such as meditation, structured visualisations and conduct of ceremonial rites. Their roles also included supervision of study programs, and this meant leading discussions on various themes. Without exception I found such individuals ill-equipped for, and disinterested in, exploratory discussions. I found a similar difficulty with distance learning courses where supervisors were overseas and communication was confined to written responses to study and practice reports. These mail-based affiliations did not last long. As well as concerns over the intellectual content I also became disaffected by the conduct of meetings and the overall attitude to what I saw then as an earnestly serious matter. On reflection I think I was a little extreme in my attitude.

My magical diary entry of 19 April 1978 reflects the degree of discontent felt in relation to the first group I was involved with: “Rethinking much about (group) and my affiliation. PJ doing likewise. Its muddlesomeness is getting to us and the people are becoming boring again. Still much serious contemplation is done so that no hasty or ill-advised thoughts or actions manifest”. (Magical Diary Vol. 1 p.64)

Months later, on July 6th the same discontent is evident:

My displeasure with the order disturbs me and there is nowhere I can turn to seek dispassionate advice. I find the members presently singularly dull and unimaginative and in
response I annoy them… The meetings are deadly boring I dislike feeling obliged to attend what is an utter waste of time … I may put in several hours of highly profitable reading in the time I endure the merciless waffle … Is my attitude disloyal? I say not for I demand quality and abhor its absence. (Magical Diary Vol. 1)

These early group-based experiences did offer some sound benefits as well, in terms of a community of like-minded individuals with a shared interest, and the opportunity to engage in ceremonial rites as a proper ritual drama. When things went well they were rewarding and enjoyable, but in the long term the innate limitations imposed by the necessarily diverse membership and reliance on a traditional teaching mode that emphasised acceptance of givens over inquiry rendered such affiliations finally unsatisfying.

With the advantage of hindsight, these groups were strongly hierarchical and were limited by the depth of knowledge and style of those who headed them. As learning experiences they did not cater to individual needs of students, but demanded compliance with a structure and style of learning that had been handed down, without much amendment, from the late 19th century.

In seeking to answer the questions that were plaguing me I needed to be able to use reference points that lay within the ‘normal’ ontological frame. The solution of stepping outside one’s culture in order to answer questions had a certain appeal, but it also struck me as a capitulation to the perceived tyranny of science, atheistic scepticism and religious dogma. The option of adopting Buddhism, Taoism, Zen or other ‘alien’ knowledge system, or becoming an adherent of the Western Mystery tradition or Wicca did not ‘solve’ the problem. Rather it provided a refuge from the storm of intellectual contention that had been, and remains, the hallmark of Western culture.

Such self-limiting knowledge systems were, to me, anachronistic, since the traditions upon which they rely were more integrated into the collective ontology than they are in the contemporary West. The Greek mystery tradition or the European ‘pagan’ roots to Wicca participated in the ontology of their parent cultures and times in ways that contemporary adherents to these systems do not. While there may well be merit in these systems, this isolation, and especially the intentional perpetuation of it, makes testing the validity of the ontological precepts, and any eventual integration into Western narrative difficult.

The proposition that there are three valid ontological positions that are equally valid, yet mutually exclusive and contradictory seemed reasonable only at the extremes of metaphysical argument. Ordinarily, it seemed, we might think that human experience draws from a common well. The alternative that one position is valid and the other two are not presents opportunity for insoluble conflict, especially where the asserted knowledge is beyond the capacity of inquiry to test its validity. The proposition that all three are potential contributors to a shared ontology, but with fundamentally differing assertions as to what is true, was difficult for me to engage with at the time.
My personal challenge had become how to frame my experiences within the ground rules of Western culture, and not presume some implicit intellectual and moral superiority that is the unfortunate consequence of adopting another intellectual and philosophical tradition. It was a challenge I failed on many occasions, as I became ‘seduced’ by the conceits of membership of groups and in the desire to ‘belong’ to a community of shared experience and knowledge. But the appeal always faded as the limits to tolerance of inquiry became evident.

**Subsequent engagement with science**

Science remained a touchstone for me, and it was to it that I constantly returned, but there was a persistent disappointment for a number of years. Laszlo (2004) summed up what he discerned as a fundamental split in scientific thought, arguing that “it has deep cultural roots. The historian of civilization Richard Tarnus pointed out that since the dawn of the modern age, the civilization of the Western world has had two faces. One face is that of progress, the other, of fall.” (p.13) Laszlo’s point is that while there has been some progression, it has come at the cost of a previous deep connection with nature. He goes on to argue that:

Contemporary Western civilization displays both positive and negative faces. Its duality is reflected in the attitude scientists adopt toward the question of meaning. Some, like Weinberg, express the negative face of Western civilization. For them meaning resides in the human mind alone: the world itself is impersonal, without purpose or intention. Others, like Peat, align themselves with the positive face. They insist that though the universe has been disenchanted by modern science, it is re-enchanted in the light of latest findings. (2004 p. 14)

Peat & Briggs (1999) argue that science, at various stages in history, becomes a metaphor for larger paradigms, and for value sets and beliefs, that are not, themselves scientific. They say that Darwinism, for example, came to be seen as a struggle of the fittest, but not fit in the sense of meaning apt, rather fitness in the sense of vigour. Hence evolution is seen in the sense of “what goes under must have been in some way flawed while what survives must be “better”. (1999 p. 6). They share the sense of a dark or negative side to a certain type of science thinking, observing that, at the end of the twentieth century “we have also encountered the dark side of that path we began to lead 800 years ago where we separated ourselves from nature.” (1999 p. 152)

Gray (2003) cites Feyerabend’s (1999) observation that “science contains so many different and yet empirically acceptable worldviews, each containing its own metaphysical background.” (p. 109), in observing that within this diversity the beliefs in an eventual single theory of science is, itself an act of metaphysical faith.
I am not sure whether science informs value systems or the value systems inform science, but within the diversity of science worldviews that interact with culturally derived values, many metaphors for more general paradigms can be developed. In observing that in the Middle Ages “rationality meant a mind capable of seeing the spiritual connections in things, the rhythms and delicate balance or “ratio” among subjects and objects’ (1999 p.120) Briggs & Peat illustrate how the meanings of language applied to thinking has shifted with the movement away from a presumption of spiritual thought as a valid element of scientific thought. Through the study of Chaos Theory, Briggs & Peat consciously see that the ideas and perceptions drawn from Chaos Theory have the power to function as a cultural metaphor, so, for them, “rationality” can recover an older meaning.

Briggs and Peat, (1999) along with Laszlo (2004) and Zukav (1980) are among a growing number of science thinkers and writers who are establishing, with empirically acceptable worldviews, an alternative set of metaphors for describing the human condition, seeing a convergence between science and metaphysics or spiritual philosophy. Briggs & Peat see that “Paradoxically the insights of the newest science share the vision of the world presented in many of the world’s oldest indigenous and spiritual traditions.” (1999 p. 7). Zukav is bolder: “Now, after three centuries, the Scientists have returned with their discoveries. They are as perplexed as we are … “We are not sure,” they tell us, “but we have accumulated evidence which indicates that the key to understanding the universe is you.” (1980 p. 92). Zukav expressed the extreme point at which inquiries into the deeper aspects of the material world merge with issues of perception and consciousness. The extend to which this is science and not metaphysics may be debatable but it does illustrate Brigg’s & Peat’s point about how scientific ideas can become metaphors for wider cultural concerns.

That there is a monolithic and homogenous thing called ‘science’ with values and beliefs in common is more myth than fact. Feyerabend’s observation (in Gray 2003) poses a multivocal response as the complexity of science throws up multiple valid interpretations. What is shared is the set of rules for inquiry called ‘scientific method’. What is not shared is the complexity of human experience, beliefs and values that inhabit those who practice science. The scientific and rational ontological framework seems to be porous, heterogeneous and complex. Belief and knowledge systems intermingle to produce a vibrant cultural discourse that is subject to constant evolution, and passionate defence. Over decades of reading, the illusion of scientific homogeneity progressively evaporated for me, revealing a dynamic and exciting realm of investigation.

For nearly a century the ontological implications of Quantum theory have been disturbing the old verities. Zukav argues that the Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics, arising out the 5th Solvay Congress in Brussels in 1927 “began a monumental reunion that was all but unnoticed at the time. The rational part of our psyche, typified by science, began to merge again with that other part of us which we had ignored since the 1700s, our irrational side.” (1980 p. 37). The further implications of Chaos,
Complexity and Systems theories, along with advances in methodologies afforded by the evolution in computing technologies, have provided new ways of interrogating human experience.

Zukav (1980) observes that although Newtonian physics has been superseded by Quantum physics as the prime explanatory system at the leading edge of inquiry, the rules of Newtonian physics still hold true for the bulk of human experience. While Quantum physics and the subsequent developments in theory and technology confer important benefits to our culture, the interface is at a substratum level, beneath mundane awareness – in communication and computing systems and the numerous now familiar devices, in the operation of complex market behaviour, in weather forecasting. For the most part neither the theories nor the ontological implications they generate penetrate and significantly influence the collective cultural narrative, at least not yet. We benefit from, and are increasingly dependent upon, a knowledge system whose potential implications upon our sense of meaning are largely unknown.

This largely unknown knowledge system has shattered the old ontological verities that once underpinned the knowledge system of the West. Zukav says that:

> the philosophical implications of quantum mechanics is that all of the things in our universe (including us) that appear to exist independently are actually part of one all-encompassing organic pattern, and that not parts of that pattern are ever really separate from it or from each other.” (1980 pp. 47,48)

Such implications, on a philosophical level, are yet to be explored, accepted or incorporated into a shared world-view.

De Quincy (2002) is more specific about the need for a broadening of the Western ontological frame, saying:

> A major – perhaps the major – element in the conceptual and perceptual matrix that shapes our worldview is our scientific attitude to consciousness and its relationship to the world of matter. For, from this view, we look out on a world devoid of any real intrinsic value, of any inherent purpose, meaning or feeling.

Science has exorcised the ghost from the machine and left us with a desacralized and dispirited world. And it has done this because the fundamental beliefs about the world (its ontology), and what we can know about the world (its epistemology), and how we can know the world (its methodology) are based upon a set of assumptions grounded in the metaphysics of matter-in-blind-motion, of reductionist mechanism and materialism. This is what must change. Without such a profound metaphysical shift, all the good works in the world will never amount to anything more than well-intentioned Band-Aids. (p. 4)

Broomfield (1997), critical of the Western way of knowing, argues that there is fundamental weakness in the Western way of knowing, that “we have made a serious error of equating our way of knowing, which
Broomfield argues that there are other ways of knowing, beyond the Western dominant ontological constructs. De Quincey agrees, arguing that:

It is critical, it seems to me, that scientific knowledge that shapes and limits the contours of our social reality – our communal “paradigm” should be expanded to include and honour non-measurable phenomena such as values, meanings, purposes, and feelings. For modern science to do this will require a radical reorientation of its basic metaphysical assumptions about the nature of reality. It will require a thorough reassessment of the epistemology underlying science – of how we know anything about the world, particularly consciousness itself. (2002 pp. 2-3)

De Quincey, as a philosopher, is primarily interested in consciousness research, so his critique does not specifically embrace other cultural perspectives. What arises from philosophical inquiry into what scientific theories is the proposition that, on an epistemological and ontological level, it is necessary to integrate cultural and even metaphysical narratives into the [rational] evidence of science. De Quincey’s position is that cultural narrative is necessarily metaphysical at base, because it frames a perception of what is real and, by implication what is not real, or valid. At this level of analysis, the illusion of the rule of science and reasoned inquiry breaks down. What emerges is the possibility of a synthesis between the ‘rational’ disciplines and what we now might see as ‘irrational’ ones – but both are, essentially ‘rational’. Such integration is a future potential rather than a present, broadly accepted endeavour, though movement toward it is underway.

In stark contrast to the perception that advances in science are leading to a closer union with ancient and traditional spiritual thought, Kurzweil (1999) illustrates the other side, arguing that in the twenty first century “The human species, along with the computational technology it has created, will be able to solve the age-old problems of need, if not desire, and will be in a position to change the nature of mortality in a postbiological future.” (p.2) Kurzweil’s passion is artificial intelligence, so his metaphor for his projected cultural values rests on computational technology. He sees the prospect of a future human state that, with the aid of technology, has rendered pure biological existence redundant. To Gray (2004) this is an instance of science giving rise to a secular religion, driven by metaphysical faiths and belief in a noble human future in which scourge of biological mortality, and other limitations and ills, is defeated. Gray does not dispute progress in science but challenges that this constitutes progress in the human condition. Science may be able to meet the needs and desires of a human population, and may defeat the otherwise inevitable death of the biological vehicle, but to Gray this is not progress. He argues that “Whatever role it may have had in the past, belief in progress has become a mechanism of self-deception that serves only to block perception of the evils that come with the growth of knowledge. In contrast, the myths of religion are ciphers containing the truth of the human condition.” (2004 p. 5)

Gray’s position draws a distinction between the kind of science that advances knowledge as if it constitutes the foundation of human knowing, and hence setting a future that is genuinely unique, and the
kind of knowledge that is complementary with past knowledge. Here we might discern a Darwinian ‘error’ which assumes that past knowledge is surrendered because it is defective and that all new knowledge is ‘better’. Gray’s chief objection is:

The error is not in thinking that human life can improve. Rather, it is in imagining that improvement can ever be cumulative. Unlike science, ethics and politics are not activities in which what is learnt in one generation can be passed on to an indefinite number of future generations. Like the arts, they are practical skills and they are easily lost.” (2004 pp. 3-4)

What Gray is arguing is that meaning itself, whether the meaning of existence, or the meaning of life, is experiential rather than the consequence of inheriting and adding to a body of knowledge. If we go back to the idea of the negative face of science in which meaning is held to exist only within the human mind, and if we take the extreme view, only within the human brain, then the endeavour of science may be seen as lacking heart. Briggs & Peat, Zukav and others propose that rather than science projecting along an evolutionary vector into unique territory, it seems to be curling back on a vector that is leading it towards a confluence with metaphysical thought, and to questions of meaning well beyond the confines of the human mind or brain, towards a cosmological sense of meaning.

Joseph Needham (1900-1995), whose extensive studies into early Chinese science and technology demonstrated the extend to which Western technological progress owed a profound debt, observed that:

… the sciences of China and Islam never dreamed of divorcing science from ethics, but when at the Scientific Revolution the final cause of Aristotle was done away with, and ethics chased out of science, things became very different, and more menacing … Science needs to be lived alongside religion, philosophy, history and aesthetic experience; alone it can lead to great harm. (in Temple 2007 p. 11).

Here Needham argues for a holistic foundation to human knowing, one in which no particular knowledge system is privileged above the others.

The objections that one should not make metaphysical projections out of science, and still call the activity science may be legitimate if scientific method is to remain at the core of scientific endeavour. But the distinction between science as a ‘pure’ pursuit given only to untainted questioning is challenged by Quantum science. The science – metaphysics nexus or science as a cultural metaphor, in which science and culture exist in mutual dependency, would seem to be inescapable realities. The religious, philosophic, historical and aesthetic elements of human thought and experience, along with science, constitute a whole. And it is this whole thought, a holistic way of knowing that seems to be increasing demanded of Western culture.
There is sufficient diversity in science, with the many worldviews arising out of perfectly sound inquiry, to enable a diverse array of reasonable positions to be derived as guides or metaphors for thinking about the human condition. This includes the development of personal positions that reflect individual orientations or biases.

My orientation toward the more metaphysical metaphors and interpretations is a step away from the deterministic perspective with which I was imbued as a child, and later encountered in psychiatry. In so far as I have sought in science answers to questions I have become progressively aware that where answers may not be available, the changes in science do provide permission to inquire within the scope of alternative paradigms, without violating the essential spirit of scientific inquiry. This is, to me, a vital contemporary development that moves science back into the community of its brother and sister modes of thought as a co-participant rather than a demagogue or tyrant.

The mystical and magical knowledge systems that lay excluded from the Western frame propose ideas and interpretations that might be embraced within a collective ontology under the umbrella of a reinterpretation of the wider cultural narrative as a metaphysical discourse. We cannot now excuse them from serious consideration as either unscientific or inconsistent with the tight frames of dogmatic religiosity. The science thinking that flows from Quantum physics, when encountered as a metaphor, virtually forces thought into metaphysical pathways. Uncertainty has dethroned certainty, and the result is elegant chaos.

If we accept as valid the scientific passion for a theory of everything (which Gray says is a metaphysical faith), then a shared ontology must also be on the table, but such must be articulated outside the constraints of cultural pragmatism and utility, at the level of metaphysical thought. Western ontology is woven into the whole of the social fabric, effecting political, economic, scientific and cultural discourse. The consequence of destabilising this complex interplay through direct metaphysical or political engagement of either a moral or intellectual character, is most likely to meet determined resistance. Nevertheless the necessary discourse, as a creative endeavour, must be undertaken. As science asks increasingly metaphysical questions to address the conundrums that arise concerning perception of, and participation in, events, the brackets that once firmly held the metaphysical at bay cease to be relevant.

This is not, however, to suggest that the whole panoply of metaphysical ideas merits immediate embrace, rather, because we are now metaphysically impoverished, we can begin to revisit ideas once cast into the outer darkness of ‘civilised’ thought. Little of what was once asserted as unvarying verity remains inviolate or sacrosanct, save, perhaps fidelity to integrity of method.
Shifting ground in psychiatry

My early experience with psychiatry had an indelible impact on me. Because I had to struggle, at a deep and urgent personal level, with notions of madness, I had had an ongoing interest in psychiatry, though it developed some years later. The question as to whether one is drifting off the path of rational thought into self-delusion also became a recurrent one as my involvement in occult groups progressed. While engagement with the occult has its particular fascinations and consolations, it is also an opportunity to permit one to be seduced into belief, and be caught up in the momentum of groupthink.

The diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia was incomprehensible to me at the time. The standard definition provides that it is a psychotic condition, which can exhibit paranoid symptoms such as “delusion of persecution” and “hallucinatory voices”, and schizophrenic symptoms include “bizarre delusions” and “hallucinations”. The essential difference I see between contemporary material on paranoid schizophrenia and what was offered to me is that “The course of paranoid schizophrenia may be episodic, with partial or complete remissions, or chronic.” (from www.schizophrenia.com) I was offered no such prospect of remission.

The idea that this illness is based upon the diagnostic perception of delusions and hallucinations is an idea about what is or is not real. A hallucination is the sense of something that does not exist and a delusion is a belief not based upon reality. In this respect psychiatry sees itself as the arbiter and expert of the real, and hence what is or is not meaningful. A diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia suggests that what is experienced by the individual is neither real nor meaningful.

I see psychiatry as essentially a medicalised construction of an ontological frame created at the level of a small but dominant element within our culture, and it reveals an arrogant hubris to set itself up as the arbiter of reality and meaning. But at a time when a culture does not have wide access to alternative perspective, such apparent expertise can rest substantially unchallenged. However, things are changing.

Read, Mosher & Bentall (2004) offers a contemporary perspective on psychiatry that vastly contrasts with my encounter. Their perspective is separated from my experience by a good 30 years and what is evident is the embrace of more contemporary philosophical models, rather than the dominant positivist model of my experience. I want to explore this text at some depth because the contrast between my experience with psychiatry and the ideas and values expressed appear to demonstrate a significant advance, but nevertheless still present unresolved problems. In the essays we see the incorporation of values that honour personal experience, indicating a fundamental shift from the substantially quantitative medical model to a more client orientated qualitative approach that gives the client’s voice a role to play. The new and emergent models of analysis and therapy “suggest that it is the way that people interpret psychotic
phenomena that accounts for distress and disability, rather than the psychotic experiences themselves”. (Morrison, A.P. in Read, Mosher & Bentall p. 291) Morrison adds, “It is also worth considering that people with psychosis frequently develop post-traumatic stress disorder in response to their treatment experiences or the psychotic symptoms themselves.” (2004 p. 302) This is certainly a view with which I have strong sympathy and accord.

Mosher (2004) expresses a view that significantly shifts psychiatry toward the established principles of psychotherapy:

Within this defined and predictable social environment, interpersonal phenomenology was practised. Its most basic tenet is ‘being with’ – an attentive but non-intrusive, gradual way of getting oneself ‘into the other person’s shoes’ so that a shared meaningfulness of the subjective aspects of the psychotic experience can be established within a confiding relationship. This requires unconditional acceptance of the experiences of others as valid and understandable within the historical context of each person’s life. (2004 pp. 351-352)

However this sentiment is still constrained by the key assumptions of psychiatry, seeing validity in a narrow personal and historical context, rather than potentially on an ontological level.

Geekie understands that “a psychotic episode can sometimes be an overwhelming experience, it is not surprising that clients are eager to make sense of it.” and “clients want to be active participants in this process rather than passive recipients of the clinicians model.” But the “client’s explanatory models may not always correspond to professional understandings of psychosis, and it may, therefore, be necessary for some form of discussion and negotiation to take place if a shared understanding between clinician and client is to be established.” (2004 p. 158) I agree with Geekie that a radical non-ordinary experience can be overwhelming and there is an urgent need to make sense of it. And he is right is saying that there can be a desire to be an active participant in meaning-making process. But I found none of his willingness to see that there is some discussion and negotiation – not that I had any explanatory model to offer at the time.

Read (2004) observes; “Any behaviour can be transformed into a symptom of mental illness simply by an expert decreeing it so. It helps, however, if the behaviour is portrayed as meaningless or bizarre. An effective way to do this is to ignore the social context.” (2004 p. 29) Read naturally does not extend his observations to include ignoring the ontological context at the metaphysical level, but here we may, at a lower scale, take “social context” to mean a relative ontological context. Here Read displays a sensitivity that at least suggests the possibility of a conversation about what is or is not madness. In my case there was an automatic presumption that my experience was meaningless and bizarre, as the diagnosis supposed the absence of foundation in reality and a violation of the ontological norm. Although I did not have a
metaphysical context to offer at the time (if I had then I would not have sought psychiatric care), alternative discourses were known, or possible to be known. The psychiatric presumption of illness indicated that alternative explanations had been discounted, with or without any exploration.

Finally, Davis and Burdett’s (2004) assertion that “meaning is not discovered. It is not something lying around on life’s road waiting to be tripped over. Rather one makes meaning and fully honours the individual struggle to make meaning out of strange and disruptive events. They argue that “Prevention of mental illness is about creating the preconditions necessary for a life worth living: the essential one being having sufficient autonomy to determine one’s own life.” (2004 p. 272) But the extent to which that autonomy embraces the freedom to elect and function within an alternative ontological frame has to be part of an ongoing dialogue between those who have experiences and those who function is to provide care when those experiences become catastrophic, and conduct, subsequently, becomes dysfunctional.

How would I have progressed to find meaning for my experiences had I had available psychiatric services operating with the values and ideas that are now possible, but by no means always or yet widely, present? I think the outcome would have been substantially the same, because despite the evident advance, psychiatry is still, in my assessment, rooted to the proposition that there is not a wider sphere of the potentially real. While there is a shift towards honouring the personal, it does not appear to go so far as to admit that disturbing and disruptive experiences may actually come from bona fide intrusions whose source and nature are outside the orthodox ontological constructs. In other words, it is not such a huge leap to imagine the existence of other planes of consciousness. The sensitivity and accommodation is almost at the point of considering utility and functionality as the critical considerations for intervention, but not yet there.

An alternative view on hearing voices

Hearing voices is one of the key diagnostic elements of schizophrenia, and certainly was so in my case. Because it was hearing voices that precipitated my crisis it is useful to consider the marked changes in the way this phenomenon is considered outside the more conventional psychiatric perception, and within a self-help context of a community of ‘sufferers’.

A review of current websites indicates a shift from the classical psychiatric position. The Mental Health Foundation, a UK charity founded in 1949, reflects a significantly more open view:

Some people define hearing voices as a symptom of mental illness, whereas some voice hearers are able to live with their voices and consider them a positive part of their lives.
Indeed research shows that especially for people recently bereaved, it is not an uncommon experience to hear the voice of the recently deceased person.

As well as hearing voices through the ears people also hear voices as if they are thoughts entering the mind from somewhere outside themselves … the thoughts are not their own and would seem to come from outside their own consciousness like telepathy (http://mentalhealth.org.uk/information/mental-health-a-z/health)

A similar, more open perspective is reflected in the website, healthline.com, which says “Auditory hallucinations are more common in psychotic conditions such as schizophrenia … In some cases hallucinations may be normal. For example, hearing the voice, or briefly seeing, a loved one who has recently died can be part of the grieving process. “ (http://mentalhealth.org.uk/information/mental-health-a-z/health)

The acceptance of hearing voices as a feature of the grieving process probably makes the diagnosis of a schizophrenic condition less acceptable, creating the problem of pathologising grief as a mental illness. The website, Intervoice.org, an information and support service for people who hear voices and those who provide care and support to them, provides research resources, including:

Rees (1971) conducted a study of 293 widowed people living in a particular area of mid-Wales. He found that 14% of those interviewed reported having had a visual hallucination of their deceased spouse, 13.3% an auditory one and 2.7% a tactile one. These categories overlapped to some extent as some people reported a hallucinatory experience in more than one modality. Of interest in light of the previous heading was the fact that 46.7% of the sample reported experiencing the presence of the deceased spouse.

From Olson, Suddeth, Peterson & Egelhoff (1985)

Widowed residents of two nursing homes who were oriented to person, time, and place were interviewed to determine the extent to which they had hallucinatory experiences of their deceased spouse. Fifty-two interviews were completed with 46 widows and six widowers. Results are reported for the widows. Twenty-eight (61%) of the widows reported hallucinatory experiences of their deceased spouse. Twenty-four (86%) of the widows described the experiences as good or helpful. Thirteen (46%) reported that the experiences continue to happen. Nineteen (54%) of the widows had never discussed the experiences with anyone before this study. These results are surprisingly similar to previously published findings by Rees in Wales and suggest that these experiences are more common in the United States than has been recognized.

What these two excerpts pose is the problem of turning grieving into an illness if the classical criteria for psychotic illness is employed. And even so, assuming that the experiences arise from part of the grief process can lock the experience of voice hearing and other non-ordinary phenomena into a period of life experience that appears to be dysfunctional, because it violates the norms of perception and experience, or so it is thought. The relationship between voice hearing and trauma is, below, asserted, and while this is a shift from such experiences as symptomatic of psychotic illness, it is nevertheless still firmly rooted in the
assumption of a nexus between voice hearing and some kind of traumatic experience that, even temporarily, the norms of perception.

Intervoice has 170 groups in the England and there are affiliated groups in 18 other countries, including Australia, where the Richmond Fellowship WA has established the Hearing Voices Network Australia.

Intervoice evolved out of the growth of The Hearing Voices Movement, which was established in 1987 by Prof Marius Romme, Professor of Social Psychiatry at the University of Limburg, Maastricht, the Netherlands, and Sandra Escher, a science journalist. The movement opposes the standard psychiatric interpretation of auditory hallucinations as being indicative of schizophrenic disorder. Romme and Baker (2007) argue; “Schizophrenia is not a valid concept because it completely fails scientific tests” and that “schizophrenia is not and never has been proven to be a brain disease”. They go on to assert that, “In our research concerning people who hear voices we found that in 77% of the people diagnoses with schizophrenia the hearing of voices was related to traumatic experiences.” and “In our experience many people start to hear voices and only afterwards develop other experiences. These arise as a reaction to hearing the voices and because people cannot cope with their voices.” (p. 1 Intervoice online Hearing Voices and Schizophrenia – updated 11/6/07)

Romme and Baker go on to say that “there are quite a large number of people (about 4%) in the general population who hear voices and even more (about 8%) have peculiar personal convictions, that we call delusions, without being ill (and this) compels us to realize that that the experience of hearing voices or having ‘delusions’ are not in themselves a sign of mental illness.” (2007 p. 2)

The position taken is still fundamentally psychiatric, arguing for recognition of “Trauma Induced Psychosis”, possibly as an alternative to schizophrenia, and asserting “recovery” from the phenomena of hearing voices is possible. Romme and Baker say that the objective of therapeutic intervention is to “help the person to learn to accept and cope with his voices and or delusions and with the problems that led to them.” (2007 p. 2)

In contrast to the clearly psychiatric perspective adopted by Romme and others the Intervoice website carries stories, feedback and comments from who accept that hearing voices can belong to valid spiritual traditions that accept such voices as not necessarily the product of trauma or necessarily undesirable phenomena. The Intervoice site, under the heading Alternative Perspectives says that Intervoice “has always considered the importance of accepting peoples’ own explanations for their voice experiences as paramount. Many people believe their voices to have spiritual or other significance.” In an unattributed short article entitled Voice hearing in history and religion the author observes that:
Throughout human history there have been descriptions of the ‘voice within’ in religion, in the occult, magical and mystical descriptions, historical, psychological, fictional and mythical. The psychological literature on these experiences has largely focused on individuals considered to be “mad”, while the religious literature concentrates on those thought to be divinely or demonically inspired or possessed. Unsurprisingly perhaps, little attention has been given to the inner voice experience of people who fall into neither of these groups.


It might be observed that those who fall into neither the mad nor religious have not existed as a category until fairly recent times, at least within psychiatry, which would also embrace the religious and demonic communications within the orbit of psychotic symptoms. In this instance psychiatry and religion have known ontological paradigms that are generally admitted within Western culture, whereas such paradigms as may exist for those in neither category are less known, and less amenable to acceptance or validation, especially if they violate the precepts of the more hegemonic ontology.

Thomas, Bracken & Leudar (2004), whose article is posted on the Intervoice site, take a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective on the subject of hearing voices, arguing that:

It is only when we consider the totality of human experience that we can understand its meaning. This has two main benefits. First it legitimates the claims made by those who hear voices that their experiences are intrinsically meaningful. Second it can provide a framework for those who with voice hearers and who are interested in understanding these experiences.” (p. 13)

Thomas et al propose an alternative to the enduring influence of Cartesianism in psychiatry and the proposition that the mental life can be explained in neurological terms. They say:

We have argued that although cognitive science and neuroscience claim to move us beyond ontological dualism, they perpetuate the essential features of Descartes’ philosophy. In particular they uphold the epistemological separation of inner mind from outer world. They fail to acknowledge the problems that arise if we regard the mind as a “thing”... We have also argued that psychiatry (and medicine) need a different philosophical framework if we are to move beyond the limitations of Cartesianism. The question of meaning lies at the heart of this framework. (2002 p. 14)

The problem with applying the cognitive model to the interpretation of auditory hallucinations is that it proposes only dysfunction, and explains them only in “terms of disordered inner mental processes” (2002 p. 15) Considering the classic story of Socrates and his daemon, Thomas et al observe that were Socrates forced to accept the proposition that his experience were hallucinatory “He would be forced to accept that there were no such things as Gods and daemons, because these beliefs were an integral aspect of his culture.” (2002 p. 15). Observing that “reality is not determined universally in terms of distinctions between inner and external worlds, but is influenced by cultural factors that make it possible for us to understand and make sense of our experiences in certain ways.” (2002 p. 16) Thomas et al propose that
“Ontological phenomenology situates the human experience in personal, historical and cultural contexts, and through these contexts that experience can be understood as meaningful.” (2002 p. 16)

The problem here with such an endeavour to locate experience within an experiential context, rather than in a clinical interpretative one, is that in a culture where hearing voices is not ‘normalised’ by reference to current beliefs that give validation, the capacity to construct meaning is problematic. What is ‘meaningful’ can become uncertain as well as contentious. While a phenomenological perspective shifts the interpretive narrative from the ontological presumptions of the observer to those of the experiencer, outside a culture whose ontological frames accommodate hearing voices as a valid element of personal or social experience, the experiencer is little benefited unless they are able to construct a useful theory. But on what basis is such a theory constructed?

Here I am not decrying the movement towards honouring the experience of the patient (in the case of diagnosed mental illness) so much as arguing that the context of the experience may not be sufficiently rich to enable a useful theory that confers meaning to be developed. Whereas Romme (2007) moves thinking about hearing voices away from an illness model, his alternative of an experiential crisis still is seen in the context of recovery from an adverse situation. It is not an ontological crisis from which one recovers through adaptation of a previously limiting ontology to one with wider or more porous boundaries. There is a distinction between the perceived need for, and benefit from, validation of personal experience as meaningful, and the development of an intellectually rigorous theory that ‘explains’ the hearing voices phenomenon, but within a preordained ontological field.

My experience not only involved the problem I had with voices I had not invited and had not agreed to have present, but also one of not being able to locate the phenomenon of hearing voices within any knowledge available to me. At a stretch the closest thing to hearing voices I knew of were the prophets of the Old Testament, but what I experienced mercifully did not present itself as God, neither was I inclined to interpret any religious significance in the experiences. The fact of the voices is one thing, but where they come from and what is their nature is another.

In the absence of validating knowledge within one’s native cultural context, the honouring of experience as being one’s own and meaningful at a personal level is potentially hollow. Although the movement away from imposed and dominant ontological frames towards the accommodation of the personal experience as potentially meaningful within a particular context is a welcome development, it is not the whole picture.

Thomas et al do propose the need for an alternative philosophical perspective and suggest that meaning is the key. What does an experience mean? If we consider the Socrates example, he has two alternatives – to accept the hallucination hypothesis or to reject it. Because he believes in gods and daemons he has an alternative ontological frame within which to locate his experience, and the hallucination proposition can
be accommodated within it. Alternatively, if hallucination is the only available explanation then gods and daemons have no reality, save as symbolic interpretive images that give ‘flesh’ to an entirely subjective experience.

Thomas et al fail, I think, to properly account for the ontological implications. Considering their Socratic illustration, they propose that a diagnosis of ‘hallucination’ must invalidate the belief in gods and daemons. But Socrates may have been mistaken. He may have hallucinated, but he has the option of an alternative explanation. Gods and daemons are part of his culture, but did that infer that every instance of hearing voices was not a hallucination? Socrates may have had the means for testing whether his experiences were hallucinations or bona fide communications with his daemon. The argument that Socrates’ cultural context enables a validation of the experience of communication with one’s daemon needs to account for the distinction between the articulation or description of an experience and the proposition that the experience is ‘real’, that the daemon exists as an entity distinct from Socrates. There is the risk of intellectual sleight of hand, in which the cultural context is used as an element of validation and the claimed reality of gods and daemons side-stepped.

As Romme and others move the possible explanations for hearing voices out of the illness model of psychiatry, they reflect a wider movement away from absolute and given ontological frames, towards the possibility of individually determined meaning arising from personal context – individual, cultural, historical. In this alternative model a dysfunction is accorded meaning. It is an aberration rather than an illness. Its roots are experiential rather than physiological, and the phenomenon is interpretive rather than absolute. In effect this is a strained accommodation of personal experience. The phenomenon of hearing voices is an artefact of interpretation that has meaning that can be discerned through investigation of elements of personal experience in context.

There is no suggestion that the source of the voices have a reality outside the subjective experience of the hearer. While Romme does not say as much, there is a gentle suggestion that such a belief might constitute a delusion – of the kind that it is possible to live with, so long as the conduct that results is merely aberrant rather than dysfunctional.

Even with reference to old cultural traditions, to other cultures, where hearing voices is accepted as part of the real, the hearer of voices is extending their context, casting a wider contextual net in order to snare an anchor upon which validation of meaningfulness can be established – meaningfulness that asserts the voices have an independent existence beyond the subjective and personal experience of the hearer. The grieving widow hearing her spouse may not be necessarily inclined to accept that the spouse and his words are an artefact of her consciousness – a comforting construct of memory serving some mechanism of grieving.
This is not a phenomenological analysis. Old cultures and other cultures alien to the hearer at the time of the experience, regardless of their capacity to validate and elucidate the phenomenon of hearing voices, cannot be part of the phenomenological context of the experience itself. As Romme and others suggest, the response to the voices may generate distress that leads dysfunction and efforts to make meaning of the experience. This meaning making is a different phase of the experience. The fact that hearing voices is a long-established historical phenomenon, validated within certain cultures as part of one’s spiritual life, does not drive a wedge between the interpretive experience (a phenomenon is interpreted as hearing voices) and the proposition of the independent reality of agencies that do speak to human via the phenomenon of hearing voices.

My experiences moved from being private and potentially only an issue of interpretation – that is, I was experiencing something that I experienced, or interpreted as, hearing voices – to encounters involving other persons. The purely personal and private explanations, as interpretations of personal reality, cease to be valid. More complex issues of aberrant or delusional conduct among several people arise, but, as with any shared experience, the possibility of an ‘objective’ reality becomes, at least, worthy of consideration, even when it seems like a sharp pin inside an ontological balloon.

If such phenomena constitute separate and distinct agencies having their own valid and independent existence, then a radically new philosophical perspective, offering quite different potential meanings becomes necessary. This was the proposition that I had put to myself. The crisis of the experiences of hearing voices was minor compared to the ontological crisis that they precipitated. The subsequent experiences in which others saw, spoke with or had thoughts (as with ML and WM) that were related to my experiences, but did not directly involve me at the point of experience as a participant, even more forcefully posed the question of separate and independent entities.

In an age in which validation of individual experience is achieving increasing acceptance over the universal declarations of how things are (the ontologically dominating powers based upon authority and persuasion), such validation is a tempting compromise. But the proposition that there are things that are objectively real outside the act of interpretation, and beyond the ontological norms, while constantly offered as a possibility, is often lost in the illusion of accommodation and acceptance. That is to say that the honouring of personal experience, the accommodating of a personal ‘reality’ that is meaningful, can also be seen to serve the purpose of avoiding the more contentious ontological problem of whether the source of the experience has an independent existence beyond the subjective experience of the subject.

There is, then, an imperative that arises in the mind of the experiencer, where the evidence exceeds the safer proposition of interpretation of an entirely personal ‘reality’, to make meaning by asking the question whether the causes of an initially aberrant experience have independent existence, and if they do, what does that mean? What does it mean as an individual for an individual to have such encounters with no
control and no knowledge of the fuller potential context? What does it mean for the ontology of a culture that has long dismissed such a prospect as preposterous and only the stuff of madness?

I would like to propose a three phase scale, using the phenomenon of hearing voices as a touchstone:

1. The classical psychiatric model that proposes that it is an illness arising from disturbance within cerebral functioning. It can’t happen in reality because there is no aspect of reality that accommodates it. Thus, when it does happen it is the consequence of cerebral dysfunction.

2. The mind responds to trauma or grief by constructing illusory vignettes in which the subject experiences auditory hallucinations as part of a meaningful mechanism, as part of a meaning making, or coping strategy. This appears to be a ‘normal’ thing, especially for those grieving the death of someone close to them. Because this is not an illness, rather an induced aberration, it is okay to live with the experience and okay to have the ‘harmless’ delusion that it is ‘real’.

3. For reasons not well understood, but which may include trauma or grief, and also an absence of any evident environmental or contextual trigger, some people experience communication from, or influence by, entities who are separate and distinct from them. The consequences may be adverse or beneficial. They may accept or reject such encounters, and may suffer distress or trauma as a consequence.

Each of the three stages has distinct responses. The first denies any possibility or reality or validity, the second asserts validity, but only subjective reality, and the third proposes validity and objective reality. The first is the dominant position of ‘modern’ Western culture. The second is a relatively recent interpretation, which might loosely be called postmodern. The third is the oldest interpretation, predating the ‘modern’.

At the time I was undergoing my experiences the second stage was either not yet developed or unavailable to me. My position was essentially black or white. It was either stage one or stage three. While many favour stage two, presently it is an alien set of ideas to me. I moved from rejecting stage one to considering stage three without considering that it might be a possible intermediate stage. At the time I lacked the intellectual sophistication to even consider stage two as feasible, and the early participation of other persons in my experiences also urged me closer to stage three.

Stage two appears to reflect much of the thinking explored in the discussion on methodology, in that it accommodates individual experience, seeking to honour it as valid and meaningful in itself, subject to reflection and articulation within the philosophic tradition, and so long as one does not appear to make declarative ontological statements that represent an exclusion of a position that might seem to be contrary. While this approach is accommodating and inclusive, and constitutes a significant advance on past philosophic or ontological positions that present definitive and exclusive assertions of factuality, it
commits a similar ‘offence’. By confining ‘reality’ within the bounds of subjective construction born out of personal and collective contexts, it makes assertion of non-conforming objective realities both contentious and objectionable. Hence the proposition that there might be independent ‘real’ entities participating in communication with humans, becomes both contentious and political.

I have thought a great deal about my position in relation to this. Do I want to appear to the reader to be non-conforming in relation to the prevailing philosophic orthodoxy? Do I want to appear to be churlish, prepared to grasp the apparent tolerance proffered by clear advances in thinking – the willingness to accommodate my experiences as meaningful – and then say that this is not enough?

I want to take some thoughts from my readings in methodology to locate my own position. Guba & Lincoln observe that “new-paradigm inquirers are, however, increasingly concerned with the single experience, the individual crisis, the epiphany or moment of discovery, with that most powerful of all threats to conventional objectivity, feeling and emotion.” (2005 p. 205). Validation of individual experience radicalises philosophic thought, because what is true for an individual is potentially true for everybody, so the potential template for universal human experience is a mosaic of individual experiences, and the extreme or radical personal experience disrupts generalisation. If it can be demonstrated that hearing voices involves intercourse with separate, independently extant entities on an individual level, then the whole ontological picture must adjust to accommodate it. The particular then becomes the universal.

Guba & Lincoln go on to assert that: “the assumption that there is no single “truth” – that all truths are but partial truths … leads us ineluctably toward the insight that there will be no single “conventional” paradigm to which all … might ascribe in some common terms and mutual understanding. Rather we stand at the threshold of a history marked by multivocality, contested meanings, paradigmatic controversies, and new textual forms.” (2005 p. 212) What is under-estimated here is that common human experience shares a common ground of base realities that are substantially uncontested, and which from our sense of ‘reality’ is collectively developed. What is real may blur at the margins and controversies may rage over interpretations and meanings, but what is real has been fleshed out as philosophic, ethical and scientific positions have evolved. The distinction between the classical psychiatric perception that hearing voices is symptomatic of illness and the evolving sense that it reflects meaningful experience, albeit, maybe as the product of trauma, or an aberration, is clear. It reflects an evolution in thought through the contesting of paradigmatic boundaries, and the weakening of a particular ontological construction against the incursions of new paradigm thinking. But it does not end there.

From the perspective of an individual who has undergone a powerful crisis of experience and thought, I argue that that the transition from denial to partial and conditional acceptance of individual and non-conforming experiences may be a stepping stone on a more radical pathway of profound ontological
transformation. I cannot say that it is definitely so. The nature of individual experience is such that one cannot safely advance from the particular to the universal, even when the philosophic environment is favourable. Guba & Lincoln, despite their enthusiasm for the importance of the individual experience are alive to the problem of interpretation. They ask “Are we interpretatively rigorous? Can our co-created constructions be trusted to provide some purchase on some important human phenomenon? (2005 p. 205) It is a vital question. I would add that there are times when an issue that is an ‘important human phenomenon” plays havoc with the intellectual comfort zones, and that subtle forces of control, even among the most ardent idealists, conspire to corrupt interpretive rigour. The question as to whether there might be independent agencies involved in communicating with humans threatens the tolerance of the tolerant. It can appear as an ontological rupture that can unravel much that has been safely contained, either disposed of or considered ‘unreal’ in an absolute sense.

The expression ‘paradigmatic controversies’ masks existential passions that accompany the polite practice of philosophic discourse. As a thinker who largely by-passed a good deal of postmodern thought in favour of esoteric thought I can celebrate the developments that open a door once closed in terms of toleration of non-conventional thinking. When Guba & Lincoln observe; “We may be entering an age of greater spirituality within research efforts” that “may yet integrate the sacred with the secular in ways freedom and self-determination” (2005 p. 212) they are articulating not an ontological evaluation, but an ethical one. There is an apparent assumption that the ontological issues will not become contentious because they have been accommodated within the relativistic sense of partial truths. But here that sense of partial truth relates to experience, rather than a sense of what constitutes the ground of the ‘real’. Like the famous tale of the blind men describing an elephant from touch, each articulating the partial truth of his limited sensory contact, nobody disputes the elephant’s existence. The experiential ground is common, only the experience and response varies, and the varieties constitute the whole, or contribute toward it.

There is a fundamental difference between stages one and three. They have differing common ground. Stage two progresses from stage one. It is an advance toward the ideals of shared experience constituting a collective sense of the real. But where acceptance of the validity of hearing voices is an advance over denial of such, it constitutes a lesser degree of acceptance than the proposition that such voices have independent existence. In the classic development of human consciousness as accepted in modern and post modern Western thought, stage three comes before stage one, and then stage two signifies the most advanced thought, moving toward the ideal of commonality. But its advance is predicated on the invalidation of stage three, or its relegation to a primary stage. If stage three were accepted as valid then not only would stage one be redundant, but stage two would have to be significantly, but not wholly redeveloped.

The crisis the stage three thinking precipitated was precisely that it was utterly alien to stage one and the ontological environment in which it flourished. It permeated my culture, such as I knew it. A combination
of immaturity and a lack of learning proposed an awful wrenching sense of disjuncture between what was happening to me and the ‘normal’ world. It is not my objective to assert that stage three is a definite alternative that rules out stages one and two. Rather that stage three is where I ended up having to go in order make sense of my experiences. It dwells at the very contentious edge of conversations involving problematic paradigms. It is an exciting place.

**From destructive doubt to a sense of possibility**

Just as there are limitations to memory, we need to not overlook the fact that there are limitations to our capacity to analyse and interpret information, of which an extraordinary volume is available to us. We have to, in effect, ignore or forget much and focus upon that which is significant. But electing to privilege some information as significant, and other as not, is a matter of choice, and such choice is made on the basis of what is important. Selectivity and choice making, deciding what is important to self, is a complex business. So de Quincey’s (2002) proposition that Self exists only as choice covers the spectrum from the secular and political to the deep metaphysical. We are what we chose to be, or how we chose to respond to what happens to us, indeed if we have the capacity for choice in such all matters. In a sense our social self, which responds to and is shaped by others, is a product of their choice, as much as it is our own.

For me, self questioning about one’s sanity was a profoundly urgent and demanding experience and when utility and ontology become blended at the level of cultural determination as to what is or is not acceptable, the problem was magnified. Importantly, I found that when the cultural ontological frame is comprised of both conscious and unconscious elements and the business of boundary keeping is privileged as being rational, the individual experience of meaning-making become a powerful struggle.

Wilson (1956) sums up the problem: “If a solution exists, it must be sought not in reasoning, but in examination of experience. We must keep in mind the logical possibility that a solution may not exist. In any case, it is the empirical approach that must be examined now.” (p. 27).

Wilson proposes that a solution may not exist as a consequence of the examination of experience, but I disagree. That is to propose that there is the possibility of an insoluble ontological dilemma, that what experience might tell us, through its examination is something that may be beyond accommodation. The fundamental difficulty in arguing from reasoning is that reasoning itself is not evidentiary and may be contaminated by ontological presumption. As Guba & Lincoln observe, considering the now willingness to consider axiological perspectives: “Arguably axiology has been “defined out of” scientific inquiry for no larger reason that it also concerns “religion”. (2005 p. 200) We can reasonably exclude that which we
presume to be unreasonable on the basis of ‘reasoned’ assessment – and others, with equal reason can find our reasoning completely unreasonable.

But at the same time how one examines experience has to be considered. It can be examined within or outside of a prevailing dominant ontological frame. As we saw with the classical psychiatric interpretation of hearing voices, the presumption that it is not possible for voice sources to exist outside the brain, requires either a presumption of dysfunction, or, more generously, adaptive response. If we allow the possibility of a source outside the brain then the experience is open to potentially unexpected and disruptive interpretations. This might push the boundaries of ‘new paradigm’ research beyond the meaning intended by Guba & Lincoln, but well within their sense of “paradigmatic controversies”.

It is one of those paradoxes of life that Wilson’s remarkable ‘The Outsider’ had eluded me until October 2007, 51 years after it had been written and 37 years after I needed to read it. Wilson’s ‘outsider’ sees the world, and experiences it differently, and hence develops another view of what is real and meaningful. If we are to embrace the individual experience as a valid contributor the collective construction of what is real, then we have to consider to what degree an ‘outsider’ view might also be an ‘insider’ one. If we are to accommodate unique individual experience at the point of crisis or epiphany, as Guba & Lincoln suggest, as a means of opening up the depth and complexity of human experience, we have to be prepared to enter a realm of inquiry that “may give rise to more dynamic, problematic, open-ended and complex forms of writing and representation”. (2005 p. 210)

That realm of inquiry includes asking whether the structures that underpin our collective sense of ‘reality’ permit the proposition that there may be domains beyond those presently embraced and validated.
Chapter Three

An exploration of Animism and how I came see it as a potentially valid knowledge system

In this chapter I discuss my ‘discovery’ of animism and why it became a central theme in my thinking. I also explore the meaning of animism in its original conception and consider what it means to discover that its essential elements are present in the major metaphysical and esoteric systems of advanced cultures, including the contemporary Western mystical and esoteric traditions.

The ‘discovery’ of animism

In the late 1980s I eschewed my involvement in practice-based occult knowledge systems, recognising that I lacked the intellectual discipline and learning to satisfy my need to develop a coherent and comprehensible narrative. I spent the near next decade pursuing a wider line of inquiry. In 2002, while reading Johnson’s *A History of Christianity* (1976) I found his discussion on the Catholic church’s passion for relics struck a chord with me. I was familiar, from my readings in anthropology, with the importance of power objects amongst traditional cultures, and I was familiar with the role of sacred objects in ritual and magical practice. The discussion on relics was new to me and rather than laughing at the practice of the veneration of relics from the comfortable standpoint of a rational educated modern person looking back over the follies of history, I found myself strangely touched and moved. It was an epiphany from a most unexpected quarter. I had had my own moment of dealing with strangely almost sacred ‘relics’ that still resonated strongly.
In 1996 I disposed of many personal and household items in a local tip as I prepared to relocate to England. This was a surprisingly emotional experience as even otherwise insignificant objects excited strong memories and feelings. I was surprised at the wrenching emotions I experienced as I discarded things that had been part of my life for many years, and that now had become impedimenta. I kept a small selection of significant objects that later were arrayed in my flat in Dover as essential and powerful links to the life I had left behind.

One day, as I sat in the flat I suddenly realised that I had created a protective circle around me, and that it had similar elements to magical rituals of protection. I had adorned the walls with images of my life in Australia and had arrayed my objects and images around the lounge room so as to create a complete encirclement that defined my ‘place’ as separate from the world beyond it. These objects and images were both personal and, in a sense, archetypal or emblematic. I had created a distinct ‘other place’ that had meaning, power and protection for me. It was a sacred place in which I could evoke memories and associations that empowered me, gave me meaning and identity. It was a refuge and a sanctuary.

Aside from photographs I had stones I had gathered on my journeys, a bush potpourri, a didgeridoo, a carved tree root from a creek bed near Broken Hill that had a distinct phallic shape to it and an array of personal memorabilia, all of which defined a distinctly Australian story. As well, I had treasured occult images and objects that included a small-scale replica of a hawk representing the Egyptian god Horus, a startlingly life-like rubber snake, an array of crystals and an ornate chalice.

Outside, in the other world of England, my story meant nothing. The things that gave me identity and significance were meaningless, or, at best, curiosities. I was beginning to understand the immigrant experience – of being a stranger in a strange land, but more importantly I was starting to comprehend the power of objects and images as vital carriers of meaning in ways that I had never before thought possible. This experience made me more attentive to the role and importance of objects as sources of meaning, memory, comfort and emotional strength. They also seemed to have ‘power’, that is, a reservoir of psychic potency, and a wellspring that tapped into distant places or realities remote in time and space. In a sense, they manifested ‘otherworldly’ potencies that could be called upon for strength and meaning in the present time.

Reading Johnson’s (1976) observations on holy relics triggered in me a sudden insight that here was a common human practice that embraced secular and sacred functions, and that provided a source of powerful meaning and symbolic importance. Context may have differed in the instances that came to mind, but the essence of the practice seemed to remain consistent. Whether the object was infused with an indwelling spirit, sacred power or association, or memory, there seemed to be a fundamental similarity - as something that could convey strength or meaning.
Over the years of my inquiry I had encountered the idea of animism, usually in the context of the descriptor “animistic” as a general idea, but having presumed its meaning, at the most basic popular level, I had not investigated further. It was not until I had proposed this research project and commenced my research reading did the idea that animism might have a larger and more significant meaning begin to form. This was in itself an accident. I had been leafing through Funk & Wagnell’s Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend and glanced across the page at ‘animism’ to read; “The belief in souls; the attributes of spirits or personality to physical objects or phenomena…” (Leach, 1975 p. 62). It was a starting point that emerged, ineluctably, as a compelling central theme for my subsequent thinking. It was unexpected, and forced a complete rethink of the original project.

Here I became aware of an apparent paradox that reinforced my perception that operating within an ontological and epistemological system of specialist language and privileged knowledge inhibited understanding. The more I thought about them, the core animistic ideas not only crossed the secular/sacred boundaries but inhabited thought systems that appeared to be remote from the popular sense of animism as a primitive knowledge system.

I understood immediately what I was reading, because here was precisely what formed the core ideas in the Western mystery tradition, in Kabbalah, in Hermeticism, in Wicca and shamanism. If animism were the primitive system as was generally believed to be, what were its core ideas doing infusing these other sophisticated knowledge systems? Why were these ideas seeping into and through purely secular ideas? How could something I had dismissed in passing as no longer valid suddenly surge up as a central theme in my thought?

As I inquired further it also seemed that knowledge systems acknowledged as being essentially animistic also incorporated many elements of my own involuntary experiences. Rationally it seemed as if I could link animism as a primitive system to later more sophisticated mystical and magical systems, including those accepted and practised in contemporary Western culture by people who could not, by any means be considered ‘primitive’, and to my own experiences.

Something was not right. If animism were the primitive system of thought from which we had evolved into rational conscious humans, then elements of the system should not be present in such abundance in contemporary mystical and magical practice. Neither should I be able to perceive a clear link throughout Christian thought nor in modern secular life.

At this stage I decided I had to revise my research project and find a way of incorporating this new information. Surprisingly this proved to be immensely difficult. Initially I was swamped with so many implications and avenues of inquiry that the project quickly lost its shape and the original research question became buried under a multitude of competing questions.
Having arrived at Animism so unexpectedly, I realised that it was now necessary to re-examine the concept. It seemed to be deeply associated with both my experiences and my learning and training in magic.

It seemed possible that I might have to interrogate the most ancient and ‘primitive’ form of human religious knowledge (Guthrie 1995, Charlton 2002) in order to gain an understanding of what had been happening to me. Although, by now, I had accumulated many explanations that cast some light upon past experiences, I had not yet resolved them into a coherent articulation of systemic thought.

I had to refine my research questions to include secondary questions that could guide me towards answering the main thesis questions. One such question was: “What role did the essential ideas of animism play in my experiences and my subsequent training and practise in ritual magic? How did this apparently primitive system fit within my evolving explanatory narrative? Did it have something important to say?

Towards a definition of animism

I have come to see in animism a most useful overarching intellectual framework, though somewhat maligned by ideological, political and cultural forces. It is therefore relevant to return to the original term and consider its meaning.

The development of the term ‘animism’ is attributed to the English scholar E. B. Tylor (1871) in his theory on the origins of religion in the latter part of the nineteenth century. However Stringer (1999), writing in the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, argues that Tylor would have preferred to use the term ‘spiritualism’ but decided against doing so because of its employment by others in a context with which he had little sympathy. Stringer notes that, “Tylor comments that Animism is not a new technical term” and a footnote explains that “the term has been especially used to denote the doctrine of Stahl. The Animism of Stahl is a revival and development in modern scientific shape of the classic theory identifying vital principle and soul’ (1871: I, 384-5)” (1999 p. 451).

The word animism itself derives from the Latin, animus/anima (soul or mind), but the deeper roots may be traced to the Greek anemos, meaning wind, and the Sanskrit aniti (he breathes). Soul is the animating principle of the world, the breath (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animism). The Greek philosophers (especially Thales) are the source by which the idea of animism has entered Western thought, to be eventually employed by Tylor, but its thought foundations are more ancient and near universal.
Tylor proposed that the earliest form of religion was a belief in ghosts and spirits, but he did this in the context of arguing that there was “a strict, scientific analogy between primitive man and the child and its mentality” (Bolle, 1987 p. 297). He saw this fundamental belief as the minimum necessary definition upon which religion might evolve.

Stringer’s reading of Tylor leads him quickly to observe, “Much to my surprise, I found myself reading a very sensitive, sophisticated, intellectually complex text written by a scholar whose ideas seemed to bear very little relation to my popular conception of his writing.” .1999 p.1 He goes on to make an important observation, in that, “My own particular interest relates to Tylor’s theories of religion, in particular his emphasis on ‘Animism’. I was not convinced that this concept could be dismissed quite as readily as many subsequent writers have suggested” (p. 1) Subsequent commentary on Tylor’s work seems critical, but this may reflect as much a vigorous interest in the subject matter as Stringer’s suggested misinterpretation and even carelessness.

Tylor’s presumption that early humans and contemporary indigenous people represented the child-like state of human consciousness at the commencement of the evolutionary journey towards modern consciousness could mean that the beliefs in spirits and ghosts were considered to be erroneous. Bolle (1999) says of Tylor that although he:

...wished to show that primitive religion was rational, that it arose from unmistakable observations, nevertheless he judged these observations to be inadequate of themselves. Although logical deductions were drawn from these observations, he believed these deductions were faulty. And although the “savages” managed to construct a natural philosophy, as a philosophy it remained crude. Tylor thus stressed the rational element in primitive religion and at the same time referred to that religion as “this farrago of nonsense. (p. 298)

But Stringer (1999) argues that Tylor, contrary to critical commentary, was not trying to find the ‘origin’ of religion. He had a stronger interest in “why so many people around the world appear to believe in things which do not make immediate rational sense to the Victorian scientific mind” (p. 1). Tylor considered animism “a 'primitive philosophy', a prerequisite for religion, and not as a religion in itself” (p. 1).

Rational speculation and theorising of the time, sought to interpret what was observed within the boundaries of a culture that steeped in the Christian tradition and that had energetically engaged with Darwin’s radical theory. Animism could not be embraced by Victorian Christianity, which invalidated any spiritual tradition that did not conform to its claim of sole franchise on divine revelation. Neither could it be embraced in other than Tylor’s terms – as a primitive state of awareness out of which humanity had since evolved: at least to those members of humanity who saw themselves as representing the present apex of development. Tylor’s position that the precepts of animism arose from valid and rational, but
inadequate, observations, resulting in erroneous interpretations about how the world worked, reflected his time and circumstance. “Tylor was a Quaker, and in the spirit of his age he associated the evolution of man with the natural process of growth and with a general increase in human understanding and responsibility” (Bolle, 1987, p. 297)

The popular broad definitions of animism, discussed below, essentially express it in terms of the presence of animating spirits in objects and the landscape, and probably do not do justice to Tylor’s ideas. He is surprisingly close to later more sympathetic ideas in thinking that “…for the primitive, the dream-world would not be less real than the waking state” (Bolle, 1987 p. 298). Bolle argues that Tylor developed a coherent “theory of the soul” which was, in Tylor’s words, “one principle part of a system of religious philosophy which unites, in an unbroken line of mental connexion, the savage fetish worshipper and the civilized Christian” (1987 p. 298). To Tylor, “In general, developments taking place on the “lower level of mythic religion” are confirmed in higher, more intellectual traditions, such as those of Greece and China, and are finally reinforced by the spread of Christianity” (1987 p. 298). To Tylor it was natural that there should be a progression through varying levels of complexity and sophistication of religious ideation that culminated in the monotheism of Christianity.

In the early stages of the last century two writers sought to embrace Tylor’s work and honour animism as a valued legacy in human evolution. Clodd (1905) argued that “Animists, in germ, were our pre-human ancestors; animists, to the core, we remain. (p. 97) and “…that what is called Animism remains the distinctive feature of the highest religions” (p. 96). Gilmore (1919) took a distinctly Christian perspective, asserting that animism had bestowed three legacies upon his culture. The first was “the precious discovery of the existence of soul in man …. The supreme expression of that value was given by Jesus of Nazareth”(p. 119). The second was “the continued life of the soul beyond the grave” and the third was “the belief in superhuman powers” (p. 120).

Gilmore considers these legacies “three great conceptions” for which the race “has to thank the stage of culture we have been studying” (p. 121). Neither Clodd nor Gilmore make any pretence to match Tylor’s scientific perspective. Both strive to accommodate the ‘primitive’ as a foundation from which subsequent religious thought has evolved, giving, in Gilmore’s case, its highest expression in Christianity. Clodd saw animism as a persistent “distinctive feature of the highest religions”. Beyond the concerns about how animism might fit within the scientific conception of human evolution Clodd and Gilmore represent an early effort to honour a legacy otherwise rendered problematic and invalid by the dominant scientific, cultural and religious certainties of the age.

The works of Clodd and Gilmore thus resonate with me, despite their now outmoded forms of expression, because they express the open-mindedness of religious thinkers striving to honour and accommodate what is elsewhere, in the same age, dismissed or diminished. Here I detect genuine efforts to acknowledge
animism as an enduring and valued foundation to religious thought, and hence to philosophic and even scientific thought. As Stringer demonstrates in his re-consideration of Tylor there is a risk of ethnocentricity and historical hubris in dismissing earlier thinkers because we fail to mine beneath the seemingly offensive and grating idiom to the rich vein of thought.

Contemporary definitions of animism follow a common thread: that all things are possessed of an individual spirit or soul. In the natural world landforms or places, streams or ponds had a resident spirit. Small objects such as tools or amulets also have their indwelling spirit. Bates (2003) says that “For the Saxons the natural environment was imbued with invisible spirits, a parallel universe of sacred power.” (p. 71). The Funk and Wagnell’s Standard Dictionary of Folklore Mythology and Legend provides an insightful example of a definition of animism as: “The belief in souls; the attribution of spirit or personality to physical objects or phenomena; specifically the religious philosophy found universally in mankind which peoples the physical universe with spirits found in animals, plants, stones, weapons, meteorological events etc.” (p. 62). This same essential description is repeated in the on-line Wikipedia: “Animism is a belief system that does not accept the separation of body and soul, of spirit from matter. As such it is based upon the belief that personalized souls are found in animals, plants, and other material objects, governing, to some degree, their existence. It also assumes that this unification of matter and spirit plays a role in daily life.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animism) These definitions embrace the essential elements of the present popular conception.

Bird-David (1999) argues that these definitions are surprising unrevised interpretations of Tylor. She says: “Amazingly, the century-old Tylorian concept appears in all these diverse sources (popular and academic, general and specific) revised little if at all.” (p. S67). She argues that this sets up a vicious cycle in which reliance upon the Tylorist interpretation reinforces the derogatory view of traditional peoples who are described as animistic. As a solution, Bird-David offers an alternative notion: animism as a relational epistemology.

She argues that:

that hunter-gatherer animism constitutes a relational (not a failed) epistemology. This epistemology is about knowing the world by focusing the same to things around them, primarily on relatedness, from a related point of view. (1999 p. S69)

Bird-David goes on to expand on this, asserting that:

We do not first personify other entities and then socialize with them but personify them as, when, and because we socialize. Recognizing a “conversation” counter-being—which amounts to accepting it into fellowship rather than recognizing a common essence – makes that being a self in relation with ourselves. (1999 p. S78)

In essence then, what Bird-David offers by way of definition is a focus upon one aspect of animism as the central theme of attention: the sense of relationship, rather than the nature of those things that populate the relationship. She does not offer this as a final thesis, but, rather, sees thinking about animism in this way.
as a spur to deeper questions concerning the nature and meaning of animistic thought, including, “Surely, however, the most intriguing question is why and how the modernist project estranged itself from the tendency to animate things, if it is indeed universal.” (1999 p. S79)

The chief distinction between Tylor’s definition of animism and Bird-David’s is, perhaps, one arising from culture. Where Tylor presumed and unpinning spiritual reality in relation to which he felt able to critique beliefs, Bird-David appears to adopt the default position of the ‘objective’ researcher by making no such presumption. This observation implies no criticism either way, but it does present a fundamental problem in that neither position is free of presumption. Tylor was able to derive his interpretation of animism because he presumed an underlying spiritual reality, just as much as Bird-David develops hers from the absence of such presumption. Is a definition that lies between both positions possible?

Bird-David’s perspective is closely allied to that of Harvey (2006) who certainly developed ‘new’ animism as a distinct and popular modality. He focuses on the sense of deep relationship, arguing that:

Although there are good reasons for listening to calls for the term animism to be abandoned, there are better reasons to celebrate its reclamation and re-application. The term has been part of the battery of prejudice with which indigenous peoples have been assaulted. This being so, it is arguable that even the old negative use of the term should be kept, carefully fenced in and surrounded by warning signs… (p. 28)

Harvey goes on say that he seeks to:

...demonstrate that animism is useful as a label for some actions, relationships, understandings, rhetorics, narratives, performances, constructions, worldviews and lifeways (Harvey, 2006, p. 28)

His principle purpose is to:

...contribute to the on-going re-animation of a term and of respectful academic engagement with our living, sensuous, communal and sometimes fragile world (p. 29).

However Harvey appears also to define this ‘new’ animism in essentially humanist terms, with a focus on conduct-based ethical concerns. He asserts that:

Animist ethics, like animist spirituality, might – indeed must – engage with a wide and diverse community of persons, but its chief concern is with better ways of being human. Lessons may be learnt from observing and communicating with eagles, rivers, rocks and trees, but the most important of these lessons is not aimed at a transcendence of humanity but a fuller expression of it. Such encounters do not merely aim to produce better persons but specifically aim to produce better humans, better eagles, better rocks and so on (p. 172).

He goes on to argue that:

Animism does not provide either a spirituality or an ethic that demands transcendence…animism is more concerned with being more human and more engaged in the life of this world (and) Elders rather than children are better acquainted with ‘the way of being human’ that is animism (p. 173).
Harvey addresses one aspect of animism, the sense of deep connection with other-than-human lives and establishes a sound argument for a sense of ‘moral economy’. He asserts that “People learn to be animists” (2006 p. 175), and adds that “For humans, life is a process of becoming increasingly human, of learning what it means to be a human person, and how to best achieve and enact such lessons” (p. 175). But in arguing that a ‘chief concern’ of Animism is ‘better ways of being human’ Harvey, in my view, sets a moral character to the idea, rather than recognising Animism as a mode of interpretation arising from experience. The moral implications may be seen as a consequence of Animistic perception.

The problematic nature of the term animism is rendered more problematic in the conception of ‘new’ animism. The original meaning, and the developed meaning, while employed disrespectfully to traditional knowledge systems because of the presumption of error, at least honoured the metaphysical or ontological depths of the belief systems. Harvey’s account appears to minimise the ontological elements of animistic experience by seeking to redefine the nature of spirits and souls, as relational constructs. I find this problematic. He suggests that: “Perhaps ‘person’ is more straightforward” (p.122). He goes on to argue that:

The terms spirit and soul may be helpful, necessary even, in a discussion of animist understandings of the nature of the world and persons within it. They are part of those popular discourses that reach for an understanding of the complexities of personhood along with ‘mind’, ‘conscience’, ‘consciousness’, ‘subconsciousness’, ‘heart’, ‘affections’ and so on. It seems unlikely that ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ will ever be defined in a fixed manner or become technical terms with unambiguous and/or fixed referents. They appear to indicate a common perception that life is more than embodiment.” (2006 p. 137)

Both soul and spirit are terms that are defined within mystical knowledge systems. Both Halevi (1974) and Knight (1965) employ distinctions that define both terms finely within the Kabbalistic knowledge system. While both terms are part of popular discourses, they remain equally part of mystical discourses and the issue of attributing precise meaning to either has more to do with whether the employers of the terms are prepared to work within a definite knowledge system or within the messier realm of popular discourse, which, of necessity, admits plural and imprecise meanings to words drawn from more defined knowledge systems. In a similar respect ‘mind’, ‘conscience’, ‘consciousness’ and ‘subconsciousness’ are equally available to precise meaning within disciplines of psychology and philosophy, even while they are freely used with less precision in popular discourse.

Harvey’s position is that “animism is not a theory that ‘everything lives’, but is concerned with particular relationships” (2006 p. 120). This seems to me to misrepresent the essential metaphysic that a spirit infused world sometimes expresses in particularised ‘persons’ (in Harvey’s sense) and these persons intersect with and interact with the sphere of human experience, bringing consequences that need to be
managed. Whether ‘everything lives’ or not depends on how ‘lives’ is understood. Does the universe live or ‘exist’, ‘persons’ with whom a managed and sensitive relationship is either desirable or necessary.

Harvey goes on to elaborate on the nature of relationships, saying that:

Extraordinary encounters and experiences may be considered to validate intuitions, expectations and understandings about the nature of the world, but they are not sought after as the primary focus of animism. Indeed encounters with some such persons require the labour of shamans, and are generally unwelcome. Even more generally, however, animism – which embeds the living of life within a richly diverse community – certainly privileges some relationships as being more important than others. These privileged relationships are usually those of everyday life supported by the occasional extraordinary encounters… (2006 pp. 124-125)

If I were to contrast Tylor with Harvey, one the ‘inventor’ of Animism and the other whose name seems synonymous of New Animism my sympathies would lie more strongly with Tylor. Harvey’s interpretation is meritorious in that it does seek to restore some sense of animistic awareness, but, for me, at the cost of seeming to deny the validity of the visceral and energetic experiences that Tylor saw as the root the way of knowing.

I drew from Harvey not a sense of the world as a “Thou”, but a sense of the world as an “It” that should be treated as if it were a “Thou”, because it is more beneficial to do so. I do not disagree with the proposition that it is more beneficial to do so, rather with the finer argument about why it is and the substance upon which the argument is made.

I first encountered the idea of the world being seen as a ‘Thou’ in Frankfort et al (1946). Frankfort proposed that our ancestors reflexively conceived of the world in terms of thouness as opposed to itness. It seems like a sensible assertion, though Radin (1957) emphatically disagreed, asserting such was the fruit of mistaken interpretation. But Radin does not actually articulate a counter proposition. He does, however, offer some finessed subtle insights into robust and practical world views. He does not, I think, offer support to Harvey’s interpretation. I prefer Frankfort’s characterisation as a broad assertion in that if thouness and itness were the only two available options then thouness, as a primary presumption about the nature of the world, would predominate as the preferred assumption. That is, I can see that an assumption of thouness may be an innate human reflex, but it also potentially represents a smarter strategy, more than Guthrie’s perceptual strategy, embracing the conceptual. This seems like support of Harvey, but here I am linking an assertion of actuality with a recognition of strategic benefit as well. Both Guthrie and Harvey see strategic merits, but deny the underpinning reality.

Likewise my experiences have obliged me to posit something closer to Tylor’s position than to Bird-David’s. Hence I have a greater sympathy for one perspective over the other. I struggle, therefore, to see things in terms that are not either/or. From my perspective there is a certain subtle self-deception in
thinking that believing there is no under-pinning spiritual reality constitutes a neutral position, rather than
an asserted contrary one. It is not possible, I think, to arrive at a compromise position between either/or.
However what the notion of relational epistemology does is find middle ground between animism and no
animism. But this is an entirely different matter. It is a useful and valuable means of advancing inquiry
because it prevents total invalidation of the idea.

I will continue to employ animism in the spirit of the Tylorist interpretation.

**Ghosts and spirits - the population of an animistic awareness**

Tylor had a stronger interest in ghosts of deceased humans, than spirits in nature as the “earliest
phenomena that could have triggered man’s mind in the formation of religion.” He thought that the
“experience of death and dying, and from dreams and dreaming” led to questions about what happens at
death. “The primitive observed what happened and refused to accept death as final. Moreover, in a dream
one would see the deceased alive, moving, speaking.” (Bolle 1987 p. 298) Perhaps Tylor’s chief difficulty
was not in the development of theory from observation and evidence, but from the constraints of the
acceptance of the proposition that Christian monotheism represented the apex of the evolution of religious
ideation. This obliged Tylor to argue backwards from a known to interpret gained knowledge in
conformity with a conclusion already established. Even though Bolle says that “the mass of evidence
drawn from history and from among contemporary tribal traditions gave Tylor’s theory the impressive
scientific persuasiveness that a more empirically inclined age desires.” (1987 p. 298) there is a
presumption at the foundation, which accepts a pre-existing conclusion as valid. The theory is ultimately
shaped by a foundational assumption and preconception.

Ghosts or spirits of deceased humans do raise the subject of post-mortem persistence of some element of
the human psyche and constitute an entirely different order of non-corporeal being, relative to ‘nature
spirits’. The spirits of the deceased and spirits of the natural world are both non-material and both are
accepted within the broad animistic system of knowledge. The subject of ghosts has been treated lightly
in the contemporary West, in popular culture and among sceptics, although it has been the subject of
serious but marginalised parapsychological study. The problem of compliant appearance and the lack of
apparent repeatability defeats conventional scientific method, though ghost stories abound at the level of
folklore and popular story telling. The questions of misapprehension and misinterpretation persist in the
face of the fundamental difficulties of achieving scientifically valid data, and against the near universality
of the phenomenon.
The shades of deceased humans play an important role in animistic thought, not only because ancestors are considered to be a source of guidance to the living, but also because they can be the source of trouble. Acceptance of ghosts demands acceptance of a post-mortem state in which human consciousness persists. And it can persist close to the human realm or remote from it. It is generally preferred that deceased human spirits remove themselves from close proximity to the human realm because otherwise their presence usually signals some kind of interference. It might be argued that those of our ancestors, for whom the ‘dream world’ and the waking world were equally real and equally sensed, had a rational and pragmatic reason for paying attention to spirits and ghosts.

My experiences suggest that what we have come to understand as Animism may have evolved, as an explanatory model, from an interpretation of experiences and perceptions. Tylor’s assertion that ghosts and spirits have played a powerful role in the development of religion makes sense to me. My own direct experience with spirits illustrates how necessary it is to merge the experiences into a explanatory narrative. Two in particular involved my father and my mother, separately in post-mortem events. My father died of a heart attack not quite a month after his second wife died of cancer. They were very close and while her death was anticipated, his was not. Several weeks after his funeral I was at home writing when I heard my name called. I was alone at the time and was not able to determine its source, so dismissed the first instance and went back to my work. The calling persisted and I finally had a strong sense of my father and his wife sitting above the high ceiling of the house. I asked why they were up there and he said that it was proper, because they were dead. They wanted to assure me that they had met up and were happy. They left and I had no more contact from them.

My mother’s situation was different. She died of colon cancer in a hospice in Hobart in early 1998. The family had gathered and we were keeping vigil. She was heavily dosed on morphine and was barely lucid. In the late afternoon of the day she died I was sitting in her room when I felt a distinct and malevolent presence and a voice saying bitterly and repeatedly “You foul bitch! you oul bitch!” (it could have been ‘witch’ as the accent was thick) I used my past training to set up a defensive barrier around her. For the next hour or so I sat there as my sisters stayed close to my mother, evidently unaware of anything untoward. Shortly before my stepfather arrived, he had gone home to sleep awhile, the atmosphere in the room altered noticeably and a distinct thought intruded “We’ll take over from here.” There was a strong business-like manner to it, and I knew, then, that my mother would go soon. She died several hours later with my stepfather at her side.

The funeral was dominated by my step-father’s Pentecostal friends. My mother had been involved in the faith but had withdrawn some time ago, and only a few of her friends were present. After the funeral one of my sisters remarked that she had not felt mum’s presence anywhere. It really wasn’t her kind of event. It was steeped in the conventions of my step-father’s faith and was deeply unappealing. Later, at the
family home, where I had returned alone, I felt her strongly in the garden that she had been making. I said
my goodbye there.

She had died on the day before my birthday, so my birthday eve had a strange elegance of a cyclical sense
of death and birth, and on the first anniversary, by which time I had removed to Lismore in northern New
South Wales, she visited. It was unexpected. I was sitting on the front steps with a glass of wine engaged
in a customary reflection on the year just ending for me when I had a sudden powerful sense of her
presence, sitting, leaning back on a verandah post. She told me she had a birthday present and proceeded
to tell me things about my childhood that had a dramatic and lasting impact on me. In neither case did I
have the experience of seeing a presence externally. Rather it was a blend of a ‘mind’s eye’ perception
allied with a distinct and powerful sense of presence.

By the time of these experiences I was accustomed to the notion of post-mortem persistence of the human
consciousness, so I was receptive to them and somewhat attuned to the prospect of them happening,
though I anticipated none of them. They were not disruptive. My mother's visitation was a kind of formal
gift giving, whereas my father’s was happy and funny. Acceptance of, and attunement to, deeper levels of
perception are not confined to these kinds of experiences. Any experienced eye or ear will see and hear
things in specific context that the unfamiliar senses will miss. The knowledgeable and experienced in any
field will perceive what is otherwise ‘not there’, and interpret that evidence in what might otherwise be
considered to be extra-sensory, even magical.

Ghosts and spirits are different. A ghost usually refers to a presence that has limited and habituated
conduct within a definite spatial domain, whereas a spirit of a deceased person possesses the full spectrum
of behaviours and nuances, as well as not being confined to a specific place. A ghost is thought to be the
energetic residual shell of a deceased person and, as such, it suggests a different order of post-mortem
existence to that inferred by the presence of the spirit of the deceased. Where a ghost may be taken to be a
kind of residual energy such phenomena might not suggest the supramundane realms that are essential in
considering the reality of spirits. Belief in spirits virtually forces a certain kind of acceptance of some
condition or state in which human life persists, and gives rise to the necessary question of what it might
be. In Tylor’s sense ghosts and spirits may well be the basis upon which religious thought evolved, for if
one persists beyond physical being important questions must be asked and answers to them sought. If
experience delivers the dead to the living as givers of gifts or the bringers of trouble then some way of
making meaning of their persistence is necessary. The scope of ontological interpretation must be
expanded to embrace even the insubstantial. Of course, for those who have no such experiences, there is
no imperative to embrace the insubstantial, and it might be unsettling to expand one’s ontological frame to
embrace what is not experienced. ]
Baldwin (1995) provides a contemporary method of engaging with deceased spirits whose adverse impact upon the living includes physical illness and behavioural aberrations. He says:

The condition of spirit possession – that is, full or partial takeover of a living human by a discarnate being – has been recognized or at least theorized in every era and every culture. In ninety per cent of societies worldwide there are records of possession-like phenomena (Foulks 1985)

Extensive contemporary clinical evidence suggests that discarnate beings, the spirits of deceased humans, can influence living people by forming a physical or mental connection or attachment, and subsequently imposing detrimental physical and/or emotional conditions and symptoms. This condition has been called the “possession state,” “possession disorder,” “spirit possession syndrome,” “spirit obsession,” or “spirit attachment.” (Hyslop 1, 1917, Wickland, 1924; 1934, Allison, 1980; Guidham, 1982; Mc All, 1982; Crabtree, 1985. Fiore, 1987). (p. 12)

The same theme is taken up by Sagan (1994), who says that:

…in all traditions and folklores of the earth, one finds references to spirits and non-physical beings which can interfere with human beings. Thus Ayurveda, the traditional medicine of India, is divided into eight sections, one of which is entirely devoted to the study of …entities, their influence on health and sanity, and the ways one can get rid of them. If we look at traditional Chinese medicine, we find that in acupuncture, among the 361 points of the 14 main meridians, 17 have Kuei (discarnate spirit) as part of their main or secondary name.” (p. 1)

So to some contemporary practitioners who deal with the adverse effects of deceased persons upon the living, the ancient tradition of the presence of ghosts and spirits is not only an acceptable premise, but a valid element of therapeutic praxis.

The extent to which interest in these ideas has developed can be gauged by the number of websites devoted to the subject. A Google search for ‘spirit releasement’ returned 30,600 possible sites – a substantial number, even if there is well-advised caution about the validity of the methods and the quality of the information.

**Dragons**

Bates (2003) focuses on the Middle-earth belief in dragons to question how we understand, over the boundary of cultural hubris, other knowledge systems. He says:

Of course today, the notion of dragons seems a fanciful idea more appropriate to childhood – our process of growing up requires that we gradually fetter our fantasies, and replace them with an adult perspective relentlessly based upon reality. So were the Anglo-Saxons childlike dreamers? On the contrary they had to be intensely practical, for times were
hard… So was the belief that dragons were real a sign of primitive thought? Being able to
distinguish between reality and fantasy even determines today our distinction between
sanity and madness. So did the people of Middle-earth live in a delusional world? (p. 79)

Bates goes on to argue that the dragon “brought insights to the people’s understanding of life’s
vicissitudes” (p. 80), but does not, I think, positively resolve any question about whether dragons are real
or not, rather that, as an idea or symbol, they were functional and served a purpose. In other words they
were a conception or perception articulated in a particular symbolic way, expressing something that was
‘real’ in one sense, but perhaps not in another.

But the notion that ‘pagan’ knowledge systems evolve because they work and impart some kind of benefit
to those who employ them is important because it asks us to accept that knowledge systems that include
such as ghosts arose because ghosts were experienced in some way, and that their impact on humans was
sufficiently important for the establishment of rituals and codes of conduct, including death rites. What we
can infer from Bates is that a knowledge system is also contingent upon the context of perception. A
culture that accepts ghosts or spirits and is attuned to their presence is more likely to encounter them than
a culture that denies their existence. In effect Tylor’s critique of animism being rational yet producing
nonsense is more comprehensible as a clash of contexts – the experiencer’s and the observer’s differing
widely.

Thus in my case, having experiences thrust upon me forced me to seek an explanatory model that
accorded with and accommodated experience. And as I moved toward a knowledge system that embraced
those experiences the more what might be denied or thought strange to others became ‘normal’ to me. As
the explanatory model evolved to accord with experience so, it seemed, that the experiences shifted from
being strange to being unremarkable. These days, for example, a sense of spirit presence (a common
enough occurrence) barely rates a mention unless there is something particular about it. Not long before
writing these words I was followed into the house by a sense of powerful and distinct passion.
I had to consciously pause to determine whether it was distress or mischief.

Bates (2003 later observes that “Dragons may have slept ‘like the dead’ for generations, but they were
hardly cold-blooded reptiles. Their internal fires flickered perpetually, ready to spit fire” (pp. 84-5). Here
he, within the uncertainty of what dragons may be, accepts enough of the imagery to accord them some
kind of presence beyond mere metaphor or symbol. Symbols do not sleep ‘like the dead’ or otherwise. The
idea that dragons were believed in because dragons exist, or existed, is not something that a contemporary
Westerner might comfortably accommodate, if for no other reason than the absence of an credible reports
concerning their presence, let alone the howls of derision that might be anticipated if such an idea were to
be seriously posited. But bearing in mind the Anglo-Saxon capacity to have knowledge of the ‘other
world’ and to apprehend it in some fashion as it interacted with material world, we cannot be sure how
they experienced the things they called dragons, nor what they were.
I had my personal accidental ‘dragon experience’ in early 1997. It was quite unexpected. I had travelled to the U.K. in early 1996 expecting to possibly relocate permanently. By March 1997 I had fairly well decided to return to Australia and travelled Ireland with the purpose of visiting my birthplace, Belfast. I was staying with my mother’s cousin in Newtonards, towards the fringe of the town, on Tullyganardy Road. One evening I wandered off up the road and sat on a pile of stones, wondering at the lack of feeling of ‘being home’. I employed a technique of projecting my consciousness into the earth, trying to sense something of the kind of vibrancy familiar to me in Australia. Unexpectedly I had a mental image of a kind of cave or nest, quite deep down, though I had no real sense of depth, in which there seemed to about four dragons sleeping. One rather languidly stirred and communicated to me the surprising, yet distinct message: “Go home. There is nothing for you here.” I was immediately shocked and wanted to withdraw quickly, but found myself forming a question about why it/they were there. I got an answer: “Our time will come again.”

This experience in Tullyganardy Road stands out as unexpected and strong. I had no sense of dragons at the time as anything with which I might engage, (then they were just an idea from fantasy) so I did not undertake the projection with anticipation of doing anything other than seeing if I could register some kind of sympathetic resonance with the land. I certainly did not go looking for dragons.

The sense of coherent energies moving through a landscape may be something like the dragons of the Anglo-Saxons, but I have no way of knowing whether that is the case. However that ability to sense coherent presences does open up the prospect of responding to apparent presences that might be non-apparent, and hence non-existent, to another who does not employ a similar kind of sensitivity.

Jones (2000), who engaged in an exhaustive study of dragons, asks:

How are peoples of diverse cultures all over the world able to express through their arts the existence of a fantastic, flying, many-toothed, reptilian monster which never existed? Additionally how are they able to relate the same fundamental story about the animal’s behaviour, strengths weaknesses, nature, breath, facial features, haunts, and proclivities? (p. 113)

He is not satisfied with conventional answers, saying:

Explanations put forth in the past have been unfocussed, as if the subject matter of the dragon made modern scholars skittish. It seems that most specialists wish to move directly to the assumption that the dragon has no physical basis in reality; that it is powerful, yes, but after all, a mere symbol and therefore by definition inherently nonexistent and empty. (p. 113)

He does not accept symbolism as the source of potent reality, nor does he accept imagination, arguing that: “The weakest of all arguments simply holds that the dragon sprang from imagination. That, of course, does not explain its universality, appearance or behaviour” (p. 115). Jones (2000) argues that the
image of the dragon combines three animals, the snake, raptor and cat that were long in a predator prey relationship with our primate ancestors, and that over time humans developed a ‘dragon complex’, concluding that “… we are still ancient beings possessed of an instinct for dragons” (p. 119).

In further considering the universal shaman images of the tree of life and the three cosmic realms, Jones asserts that “The roots of the dragon, the tree, and the three levels are all part of what has to be one of the most crucial elements in understanding how culture evolved, the arboreal experience of our most ancient ancestors” (2000, p. 133). In essence Jones is saying that the only possible explanation for the universality of dragons, something that explains the degree of uniformity of the ideation can be found in the presence of an instinct, a melded image of predators that evolved into a complex in the course of human evolution. The presence of dragons or serpents associated with the tree of life is not an archetypal symbol for any subtle reality, but a residue that goes back to our arboreal primate ancestors, for whom the tree represented a fundamental cosmology of nurture and protection from the predators below and above. Either that or the dragons are denizens of the other world, and represent in symbolic form powers and agencies that impinge upon the physical world from time to time. Jones does not consider this explanation, but he does present sufficient argument against the dragon as misperception or a purely imaginary effort to symbolise the vicissitudes of life.

The Politics of Experience

Several elements of animism – the perception of spirits and the existence of different realms to which the dead and shamanic travellers may venture constitute a recurrent phenomena that embrace not only ‘primitive’ and archaic cultures but also contemporary practitioners of mystical and magical systems. The simplest explanation, employing Ockham’s Razor, is that this wide and varied adherence arises out of common experience.

I have earlier cited Bates to argue that there is a fundamental sense of utility implicit in animistic ideation. Even Tylor, in his thinking about how archaic people confronted death, acknowledged that the development of animistic narratives at least were predicated upon an experiential ground, as well as rooted in attributes of perception.

If the idea of animism is accepted as arising from a fundamental human utility in responding to experience and perception, then we might expect that there were/are those who develop particular facility and skill in intentional experience and the formulation of specific knowledge. An examination of this knowledge of shamans and magicians can help to identify a coherent body of systematised knowledge drawn from experience and experimentation.
The role of experience, as an intentional practitioner, as opposed to being the recipient of unbidden encounters with phenomena, is less important to this inquiry. However the fact that there are communities of practice does testify to the power of the ideas associated with shamanic and magical practice.

My encounters with intentional practice left me keenly aware of the risks of self-deception, and the appeal of ideas and language whose meanings were too opaque to outsiders and not at all lucid to insiders. Experiences that occur in conformity to practice raise different types of questions; and usually not ones as extreme as those generated by wild occurrences.

Nothing in my extensive reading and practice introduced me to the idea of animism beyond an encounter with the notion in passing. Although I can now look back and see how past study and practice melds with my emerging understanding of animism, none of it was the engine of my inquiry.

**Animism as a means to articulate a response to experience.**

Non-conforming experiences do create an exceptional problem of validation, especially when they generate challenging epistemological issues that impact upon self-identity. I sought out possible sources of explanation and meaning for my experiences within different esoteric traditions, but I found these traditions, in my experience, were more inclined to offer protective narratives that embraced ‘experiences’ rather than providing modes of inquiry that ‘explained’ them in a contemporary context. In this respect traditions could be both a haven and cul de sac. I did not want comfort at the cost of understanding.

As a European in Australia, I drew upon traditions that reflected my cultural orientation initially. I sought training in the Western mystery tradition and in Wicca. This presented important questions concerning the relationship between place and culture – what was appropriate in seeking to honour where one was, in terms of practices, symbols and the imagery and language used. What started out as a simple question about what direction one should walk within a circle escalated into a powerful and unsettling doubt about the way in which one might think about Magic, and hence one’s own sense of presence within, and relationship to the world. The traditional thing is to move ‘clockwise’, but the path of a clock’s arms reflects the passage of the sun in the northern hemisphere. In the southern hemisphere this is direction is what we call anti-clockwise. In which direction should we move in Australia? To answer this question a great deal of argument and debate ensued. We settled on anti-clockwise. But then there arose a greater question. Our seasonal celebrations were the opposite time of the year. As a culture we celebrated the spring festival of Easter in autumn and the winter festival of Christmas in summer. If place mattered, then its character and seasons had to be honoured. Symbols had to be consistent with environment. No holly or
snow at Christmas. The energies that were invoked and celebrated had to be founded in reality and not tradition, and where tradition persisted it had to be deeply rooted in reality, not memory.

An opportunity to explore these questions was provided by the discarnate teacher of an English magical order, whose head visited Australia. The following is taken from my magical diary entries of February 11, 1979 (Vol 1)

S.K. (the order head) allowed us to speak with T.M., the order’s inner plane teacher. I asked about the god forms distinct to this country and with which we could expect to be working.

T.M. The nature of the god forms of this land are active and fiery – they need controlling from within yourself. Let them rise within you rather than seek them at their source. They are difficult and very ancient forms.

I asked whether there might be a name of a god that might be applicable. The response was:

T.M. Little use to you. Look for them among the ancient god names you know best. Names are of little use; it is the nature of the force and the symbol that counts.

The theme was later followed up in conversation with our own guide. Entries in my magical diary of Feb 18 1979, pages 153 & 154 pick up the topic.

A: There are many forces which are peculiar to different races. There are forces which are common to all. But they are not always equitable.

Me: Suppose the question were to lead on – why then X in Australia. Is it a question of our past?

A: X is a force with which you are familiar. You – both of you are familiar. You would not try to contact this – you could not try to contact this force via the natural god forms of this land. They are not compatible to you. But there is rather a lot of useful information available to you – if you use that particular god nature. It is a tradition with which you have had links.

I have removed a specific name from the text above, replacing it with X to conform with a tradition of confidentiality. What is suggested by these two sources is that it is not always appropriate to access indigenous traditions as a source of spiritual insight and experience, because the nature of the energy is unsuited to the psyche of the alien individual. In this case this would be an admonishment against seeking to use the Aboriginal tradition. In my case what was recommended was a Greek form. The Greek tradition is something with which I have some familiarity, if for no other reason that its central role in the evolution of Western culture, through mythology and classical literature and thought, made me a natural heir. It is safer territory for my psyche than the raw energies of the Australian landscape.

The distinction between Greek and Aboriginal culture, as perceived through the filters of contemporary Western culture are considerable. Each is a response to their presence in place and time, but in terms of the ‘civilised’ psyche one is kinder than the other because the ‘civilised’ psyche is less robustly attuned to unmediated engagement with the natural forces of the world. As a filter through which the great energies we apprehend as gods might be encountered the Greek tradition is considered an easier, safer, path for the Western psyche. It is not, however, a kinder gentler filter in the sense that it is undemanding. The energies engaged with in the mystery traditions are considered inherently dangerous. That danger increases if the individual is ill-prepared or less robust.
The idea that ‘spirit’ agencies and entities are inherently dangerous, regardless of whether they are considered malign or benign embraces not just the profoundly disrupting and unsettling experiences I encountered but also ideas about potency. We are familiar with, and accepting of, the idea that many of our technologies are powerful and potentially lethal or catastrophically harmful if carelessly engaged with or ill-used. Motor cars and chainsaws are good examples. Likewise many life experiences can leave enduring legacies of degree of harm. Injury from devices and experiences can have their origins in the actions of the subtle agencies and entities as much as benefits. I have no direct clear memories of suffering specific injuries at the hands of such influences, other than the disruptions and dramas recounted, but I have strong memories of compelling influences upon my actions that clearly demonstrate the potential for good or ill.

On the 10th of December 1977 I was invited to a party in Balmain. I was sharing a house in the Glebe at the time and the invitation came from a housemate (RB). We took a taxi, along with two friends but on the way RB discovered that he’d left the paper with the address in his room. He proposed going to the pub instead. Normally I’d have agreed because I’ve never really enjoyed parties where I know very few people, but on this occasion I was gripped with a powerful and astonishing panic. I had to get to that party even if it meant knocking on every door in Balmain. We returned and got the address. At the party location we were ushered upstairs to a room with about ten people. We sat around for a while and going to the pub looked better and better as an option. But by then RB and our friends were happily stoned and in no mood to go anywhere. I was bored and decided I’d go to the pub. I’d forgotten about the panic that had driven me earlier.

As I left to go down the stairs I encountered a kind of force field through which I could not progress. No matter how hard I tried I was not able to commence my descent. I’d experienced this several times before and knew I had no hope of getting through it. I decided there must be a reason for staying so I returned to my friends. Subsequently, under another compulsion, I engaged in some bizarre conduct (about which I still feel a surge of embarrassment) that resulted in me meeting and later marrying my present partner. In this instance in one evening three instances of intrusive influence changed the course of events. First there was the induced panic the changed the plan to abandon the party and go to the pub. Second I was prevented from leaving the party. Third I was induced to behave in an outrageous manner utterly at odds with my normal shy socially unconfident self. Without each of these interventions the meeting would not have occurred. Here, plainly, was evidence of the capacity of something to affect my conduct for good or ill.

The proposition that agencies and entities can be place specific or not, and require care in engagement through forms and manners appropriate to them and the person seeking that engagement is consistent with the values and beliefs in cultures who may be considered animistic. Likewise the idea that agencies and entities may be malign or benign or neither, but simply dangerous, in their interaction with humans is
consistent with animistic thought. Similarly, whether considered to be ghosts, spirits or gods, the presence of influences playing upon human life to alter conduct, and hence fate, is accepted among animistic cultures.

Radin (1957) observes that while some traditional peoples actively seek engagement with spirits through various disciplines such as rituals and vision quests they equally are cautious, recognising that some that are called up can be dangerous, if not lethal.

**The use of ‘animism’ in contemporary Western culture**

Although animistic ideas are embraced in the popularity of contemporary Pagan, Wiccan and Shamanic practices the words ‘animism’ and ‘animistic’ are rarely used. But the term, and derivations of it, presently enjoy a resurgent reputation in psychological and in environmental (natural and urban) fields, as well as in arts theory and technology.

Charlton (2002) sees animism as the consequence of human consciousness being a social intelligence that sees the world as sentient, as composed of agents who have “dispositions, motivations and intentions” (p.1). He speaks of “recovered animism”, arguing that:

> Animism is not a religious or philosophical doctrine, neither is it an error made by people too young or too primitive to know better - animism is nothing less than the fundamental mode by which human consciousness regards the world. Consciousness just is animistic. And this perspective is a consequence of human evolutionary history (p. 2).

He suggests that there is a future for animistic consciousness, but maybe at an individual, rather than a collective level, at least in more urbanised and standardised expressions of human culture:

> The most probable human future entails more complexity, more planning, more control, and more alienation. But if a shared and public animism is ruled-out, the situation for individuals is different. There may be niches for more-or-less wholly animistic individuals even in modern society, and there certainly are niches for animistic thinking within many ordinary people’s lives. The problem is that, for a modern adult, recovery of animistic thinking entails undoing the effects of an exceptionally thorough and prolonged process of socialisation that has buried animism under a vast superstructure of repressions. Modern adults cannot necessarily recover their animistic thoughts at will, even temporarily (Charlton, 2002 pp. 4-5).

Charlton thinks that animistic thinking has declined as a consequence of progressive alienation from the kinds of situations and relationships that made it a ‘natural’ aspect of human awareness. I would argue that certainly the spiritual and intellectual environment in the world into which I was born reflected a cultural movement away from animistic consciousness, at least at the level of understanding and valuing ways of knowing that did not conform to either the religious or scientific orthodoxies that prevailed.
Thinking that employs animistic thoughts and language in response to perceptions of a growing environmental crises appears to have been gathering support for some time. In 1991 Mack argued for the need to develop, or invent, “a new psychology of our relationship to the Earth” (p. 106). He said:

By and large, we in the West have rejected the language and experience of the sacred, the divine, and the animation of nature. Our psychology is predominantly a psychology of mechanisms, parts and linear relationships. We have grown suspicious of experiences, no matter how powerful, that cannot be quantified, and we distrust the language of reverence, spirit, and mystical connection, recalling perhaps with fear the superstitiousness and holy wars of earlier periods (p. 106).

Mack saw a problem because of this suspicion. The new psychology must:

...by virtue of the very nature of the task be a psychology which includes a powerful spiritual element. This will mean, for example, a reanimation of the forests and of nature, which we have so systematically and proudly denuded of their spiritual meaning (Mack, 1991 p. 106).

Elsewhere there is evidence that animism has been taken up with enthusiasm by activists and innovators concerned to reframe thinking by using the term as both an intellectual and emotive leverage to support their vision. Bioregional animism essentially ‘borrows’ animism to strengthen bioregional arguments. The Centre for Bioregional Animism (Bioregionalanimism.com) follows Harvey’s model in its definition:

It is a form of Personalism where other than human persons including the whole bioregion itself is related to and communicated with as a person, not as if it was a person but as a person. Animism does not personify other then human persons, animals forces of nature, plants, the land and sky, it gives up human dominion over the designation of who and what a person is.

In similar manner the Centre also draws in shamanism to evoke the depth of meaning and connection it sees as fundamental to its conception of bioregionalism:

Bioregional animism attempts to show us that the spirit of the shaman as well as the animist is derived from and is an expression of the bioregion, of the land itself and forms from deeply intimate relationships with the life and spirit of those around us. Bioregional animism works with a base inspiration from the work of Graham Harvey’s New Animism www.animism.org.uk/. As well as with modern concepts of bioregionalism by such authors on the subject as Kirkpatrick Sales.

Here, I think, we see echoes of Charlton’s notion of ‘recovered animism’ and Mack’s perception of the need for a new psychology that has a more spiritual voice. It is consistent with the wider popularisation of animistic ideas through shamanism, as well as responding to the relational appeal of Harvey’s work. But unlike Mack’s interest in a formal psychology, this is activism, an informal adoption and adaptation of extant ideas in order to meet an imperative to re-conceive and re-value the physical environment.

Elsewhere urban animism reflects a re-conception of the built, human mediated environment. Furney (2004) explores the proposition that while most neo-pagans are urban dwellers, their tradition and its
symbols and practices are firmly rural. How does an urban pagan cope with the culturally conditioned habit of seeing the cityscape as substantially inanimate? Can the animistic sentiments of the urban pagan be transformed into a form of “urban re-enchantment”? Furney’s interviews with urban pagans suggest that many are making the change. Some are self-describing as “techno-pagans” and others are inventing new goddesses to respond to the urban environment. She cites “Asphalta (goddess of roads and those who travel them) who help drivers find a parking space and Digitalis – Goddess of computers” (p.11) as examples of such adaptation.

On a more sophisticated level, Peck (2005) writes on responses to a 1923 German Expressionist film, “Die Strasse”, noting that:

Anton Kaes goes on to develop a brief but bristling theory of the "nexus between urban modernity and the disciplining power of vision." Protagonists as flaneurs encounter a city that offers them excitement and risk, as well as danger and defeat. What he calls "urban animism," "the gendered gaze," and finally "vision and power" round out a sophisticated framework for interpreting the status of seeing in the Expressionist film and beyond. (p.1)

There is no exploration of what meaning is attached to “urban animism” in this context. In an almost equally unhelpful manner Reutter (2003) comments on Ludwig (2002), referring to his “methodological gesture” he names “radical animism” to “supplement cognitive concepts such as "radical empiricism” and "radical constructivism” and to indicate the epistemological possibilities of this theory that can respond to the political, ethnic and identity concerns of multicultural theorists and generally of contemporary theorists engaged in seeking exits from Western logocentrism.” (p.436)

Greenfield (2007), recognises the technological dimensions of animism. From the website session overview notes he says:

Folklore is replete with caves that open at a spoken command, swords that can be claimed only by a single individual, mirrors that answer with killing honesty when asked to name the fairest maiden in the land, and so on. Why should anyone be surprised when we try to restage these tales, this time with our technology in the central role?

… many current models for interaction with ubiquitous information-processing systems amount to a reassertion of animism -- and a reawakening of something that has lain dormant within us for much of modernity. What are the consequences of this reawakening for the designers, developers, and marketers of ubiquitous systems?

Greenfield comprehends that advanced technologies are not extensions of a linear vector of development, but a ‘return’ to something fundamental, a potent conception allied to a potent impulse. Material technology becomes the medium, effectively externalising inner domains and inner heritages.

Animism appears to serve a variety of contemporary needs, from providing a voice to articulate pressing environmental concerns for the construction of a narrative that enables a reframing of a sense of relationship with both the natural and human-made environments to articulating more complex and
difficult theories on perception and relationship in the arts. Greenfield uses the term to envision existing and emerging technologies.

The idea of urban animism is, in my view, under-explored and under-utilised. Animism is not a ‘belief system’ but a way of knowing that is context sensitive. That is that the extent to which it expresses, and the manner of its expression depends upon the context of the experiencer. One whose lifeworld is in deep wilderness and for whom the natural world is the dominant domain of physical experience, through deep identity and relationship, will perceive the animistic elements of the environment. But an urban dweller, with none of that attunement of identity and sense may not at all, or very dimly, see the natural world as source of meaning or identity. Likewise a deep urban dweller will see their world as ‘alive’ with history and meaning. The sense of indwelling spirit, as in history ‘coming alive”, may be metaphorical on one level, but in the human mediated and human dominated world the source of identity, meaning and relationship will be, at its root, human

These wider and contemporary uses of animism to articulate depths of perceptions and relational senses fit my own emerging view that animistic thought has validity in the human-mediated, the constructed and the technological domains, as much as it might be employed to express a more ‘natural’ encounter between the human and the world. The employment of ideas drawn from animism to influence environmental thinking and policy suggests an exciting evolution of our shared thinking. If it is a valid way of knowing, then animistic thought must be able to make a sophisticated contribution to the shared formation of values and knowledge.

**My definition of animism**

Guthrie makes an important distinction between a psychological notion of animism, the views of Tylor and those of subsequent users of the term. He argues that Tylor’s original idea of a belief in spirits has been altered by “many anthropologists and other students of religion” who “adopted his term, animism … and narrowed his meaning to a second, related sense: that form of religion that attributes a spirit to everything” (1995 p. 40).

A third variation derives from Piaget (Guthrie 1995), and is employed by developmental psychologists. In this children see things in the world as living and conscious. Piaget saw this perception as confusion (also attributed to ‘primitive’ people), but though this might be reflexive in a child, adults will intentionally and consciously elect to see the world in animistic terms. Guthrie does not believe in spirits or ghosts. He does not fully consider animistic thought as an error, but rather a valid strategy that is, finally, rooted in error. This is Pascal’s bet, that it is better to be wrong and safe than wrong and sorry. Guthrie seeks to validate animism as a strategy while arguing that it remains
without substance as an interpretation of perception. Here he essentially remains with the company of scholars who interpret other people’s experience in terms of their own knowledge rules. In essence this is ‘explaining’ a phenomenon by fitting it into an ontological frame, obliging it to conform to a convention of knowledge rules. It is how thinkers work backwards from assumptions (no ghosts or spirits and no ‘reality’ to animistic perception) to explain a phenomenon in terms of the framing assumptions.

I am one such adult who elects to see the world in substantially animistic terms. But, because I base this choice upon experience (multiple incidences) I accept Tylor’s proposition concerning ghosts and spirits. The notion that ghosts and spirits are real does not fit the knowledge rules under which Guthrie and others work. I am also inclined toward the idea of spirits in things or places, and the notion that the world is living and conscious.

I am inclined toward the idea of a spirit associated with things or places because this is what my experience tells me, and I choose to see the world as living or conscious at least in some degree because this seems to (a) be supported by experience – and hence probably true, and (b) a useful philosophical strategy that enables qualities of relational experience that are superior (functionally and sensuously) to considered alternatives. In this last respect I differ fundamentally from Harvey in his apparent willingness to disconnect the apparent benefits of the relational experience from any possible underpinning reality.

While Guthrie is content to observe that animism is alive and well and living in the western psyche as an intentional choice as well as a reflex, he does not sufficiently work with the transition from an essentially animistic view of the world to a mechanistic one. He does note the transition (1995 pp. 54-61), especially the spread of Newtonian ideas as the Industrial Revolution took hold and celebrated the machine and material science. He also notes that there is not a clearly defined and universally accepted line that divides the animate and the inanimate.

Long before machines, it is likely that the world was seen as living because that was the available frame, possibly the only one. The emergence of ‘in-animism’ has not yet finally disposed of the animate frame, but it has certainly altered the sense of relationship, affecting the moral dimension. It has also altered the attunement of the senses by offering an alternative way of perceiving the world, valuing it and relating to it. I argue that there has evolved a cultural imperative to prefer the in-animation of the world, and this may be seen, in its own right, as a perceptual and conceptual strategy that arose in consequence of the particular vector taken by human evolution via Western culture.

The issue of error, therefore, is not a base issue of is/is not, rather it is one of perception in the manner that an expert eye will see what is invisible, or apparently non-existent. Depending on whether the expertise is valued or not we may or may not validate the claimed perception and interpretation. The Western cultural imperative has not favoured the animistic ‘expertise’.
The proposition that animism has been present and prevalent for the majority of humans over most of our collective history may be true simply because the available model has been animistic, not mechanistic. Animism might, therefore, be ‘hardwired’ into our psyches because generations after generations have modelled our brains that way.

Guthrie demonstrates that perceptual error occurs regularly, and we know that conceptual error is a constant companion of human awareness and consciousness. But the issue about animistic thought is not whether it is ‘right’ in terms of explanatory narratives. The whole body of non-animistic religious thought, humanist, rationalist, scientific thought is no less prone to conceptual error that becomes erroneous explanatory narratives at every level of our culture. We refine or evolve our perceptions and conceptions, but such is our passion for interpretation that novel errors seem to constantly arise. The alternative to animistic thought might be considered to be ‘in-animistic’ thought: the merits of which have yet to be, in my mind, sufficiently asserted or defended.

In certain respects I was more attuned to animistic thought than many others in my culture. I grew up in either rural settings or on the fringe of towns or suburbs with ready access to farmland or the bush. I began collecting rocks and shells in late primary school and went bushwalking from early high school days. What few memories I have of distinctly human environments were the wharves in Hobart, where I went fishing or the ruins of Port Arthur, where my family frequently visited. After high school I was bushwalking, rock climbing or camping every chance I could get. I loved wilderness and I enjoyed my solitude. I developed an acute sensitivity to the Tasmanian wilderness refined through my then passion for geology and my love of photography.

This sensitivity is an attunement to a level of immersion in place at which perception and awareness are sharply responsive to subtle presences and behaviours. In those days I had no language for it. These days I would call it animistic.

I was also cursed, or blessed, with a measure of what is popularly called psychic sensitivity, again at a time when I had no language for it. Combined, the ‘educated’ and the innate sensitivities have precipitated considerably more non-ordinary experiences than appear to be available to other people. Some came unbidden, and unwelcome. Others were sought or welcomed. I can no more explain why I have had experiences that are not common than I can explain the appearance of talents for music, art, mathematics and the like.

I can well understand the making of theories that exclude the reality of ghosts and spirits by people who do not experience them, but such theories are relevant only to that class of persons, and not to humans as a whole. One might perceive a kind of hubris of universalism that pervades Western thought. Among those for whom spirits and ghosts are realities, and for whom the world is spirit infused and thought to be alive
and conscious (along a spectrum of degrees) animism can have a distinctly definite definition. This is mine:

Animism is a term that applies to a mode of perception or experiences that affirm that ghosts and spirits are real. It is also a sense of relationship and a philosophy formulated in consequence of accepting the proposition that the world is spirit infused. It is further a discourse and a narrative form that expresses perceptions, thoughts and sentiments arising from living the acceptance of the proposition. Finally, it informs the psychological and behavioural dimensions of the lived experience. It is, in essence, the sum of consequences that arise from perceiving the world, the cosmos as a Thou.

It is, however, no less prone to error, and will make the same errors, as any other mode of perception, interpretation and explanation. And those errors can and will inhabit the narrative, known or unknown to the teller and the hearer.
Chapter Four

An exploration of animistic ideas in the contemporary
Western world

In this chapter I explore the extent to which animism is apparently present within contemporary Western culture, other than through intentional use of the term and its ideas.

Camouflaged Ideas

I argue that animistic thought is present within Western cultural conceptions and language, but camouflaged against a secular backdrop. That is that as human context changes, so do ideas and the language used to articulate them, but this does not mean that the underlying architecture of the ideas are fundamentally altered.

Although animistic thought is not formally or widely recognised as a component of contemporary Western consciousness there many elements of popular culture that are directly animistic or contain thought elements that are linked to a wider sense of animistic ideation.

As I became more attuned to intentional animistic thinking it became easier to identify or attribute animistic ideas. Some are familiar, for example the way in which people may name boats or vehicles, or the way sport teams favour ‘totemic’ animals or mythic or heroic figures to articulate something of their team spirit. Other ideas are linked to the evolution of technologies, especially the development of more ‘animated’ devices using artificial intelligence (such as voice recognition) and automation. In the context of life as we understand it this ‘animation’ is a faux vivification, but the developmental potential for more
subtle interaction between device and user does, at least, enable a comfortable (or disturbing) illusion to be created. And what happens is often less about actuality than perception, in terms of how such developments are accepted as normal.

Animistic ideas are gaining niche popularity as intentional adoption at the level of interest in the spectrum of ‘Pagan’ or Neo-pagan philosophies and practices. At the same time animistic and animated toys and entertainments are a response to the increased sophistication of technologies and the lowering of cost points. But this would not be possible without market demand or at the least, responsiveness to these innovations.

In an age in which traditional religions have lost appeal, and atheism and scepticism have grown, the phenomenal popularity of the *Harry Potter* books and movies, along with The *Lord of the Rings* movies reflect a persistent interest in and acceptance of the magical and the animistic. One assessment of the top grossing movies in the USA market suggests that only 25% do not have a fantasy, science fiction or magical/animistic element. And in the top ten this drops to 10%, with *The Titanic*, the only non-magical movie, at number one. ([http://www.imdb.com/boxoffice/alltimegreatest](http://www.imdb.com/boxoffice/alltimegreatest)). This level of popularity such movies is consistent with advances in, especially, CGI technology, which makes it possible to create film representations of ideas otherwise confined to books and comics.

I grew up with Marvel comics, which might have extended my childhood exposure to ‘acceptable’ animistic tales, such as Mother Goose and *Wind in the Willows*. I was also exposed to Aesop’s fables and fairy tales, which were perfectly acceptable within a Christian household. This same household permitted stories of Christmas elves, Santa Claus and flying reindeer. In an almost schizoid manner my parents were able to, on the one hand, celebrate the animism of childhood so long as it was fantasy; and, on the other, have no tolerance for other than the Christian world-view. It seems to me now that we exercise our secret inner animism through our children, allowing ourselves to be washed over by the myriad instances of animation of normally inanimate objects and the anthropomorphic transformation of wild and domestic creatures, as well as giving them voice in their own right.

It is as if the caveat that allows and legitimises childhood fantasy acts as a permission-giver to recover, as adults, that which we surrendered. Perhaps Charlton’s notion of ‘recovered animism’ begins here and continues to express through popular entertainment, but remains as entertainment.

In the late 1970s I had an experience that continues to challenge my thinking about how the brain filters experience. I was woken suddenly by PJ who urgently wanted to tell me of her out of body experience. She had been floating above the bed up near the ceiling and had become alarmed. She told me I had spoken to her very calmly, directing her to return slowly to the bed and her physical body. I had been woken from a dream in which I was standing in a dry sparse landscape. In front of me was a multi-storey
construction made entirely of scaffolding. I was directing the operator of a crane on top of the construction to lower a stretcher holding a body in a fragile state onto two semi-trailers parked side by side. Even in the dream I paused to observe how odd it was that the trucks’ suspension was surprisingly soft. I had achieved my task and the scene instantly changed to another, which had PJ on the lying on the ground when I was woken up. The bed we were sleeping on was made from two single dunlopillo mattresses.

The opportunity to match the two experiences and draw parallels between my dream and PJ’s out of body drama illustrates to me how the fantastic and absurd nature of dreams can mask a lucid experience. Dream imagery has a metaphorical function, crowding meaning from non-ordinary lucid experience into seemingly absurd or fantastic image experiences. The reasons and mechanisms that generate this odd process of translation must be left to brain science, but the business of interpreting dreams is ancient. Jung says, “Nowadays animals, dragons, and other living creatures are readily replaced in dreams by railways, locomotives, motorcycles, aeroplanes, and suchlike artificial products...”(in Sabini 2002 p. 74). It would seem that it is not so much that the symbols have enduring meaning, but that they are context related, and stripped to their barest functionality.

Gardner (1999) argues that Western folklore and fairy tale masks historic truths, and Hancock (2005) argues that the same also mask non-ordinary experiences from the invisible world. Von Franz (1995) says that fantasy and mythic imagery conceal psychological and psycho-spiritual truths, not arising beyond human consciousness. Regardless of where each is right or not, what we have is a masking of a lucid or rational ‘truth’ in fantastical imagery in dream, myth and fairy stories. It is as if the human psyche and brain combine to generate an in between realm of metaphor and illusion that separates ordinary waking consciousness from deeper lucid meaning. This raises the importance of the role of fantasy in the contemporary world, in story and in advertising. This is not so much myth but the clothing of myth, such that the fantastical speaks to us because it is so often the form and voice of myth.

Whether the content is ‘true’ is probably something purists may dispute, as contemporary stories show no loyalties to what are seen to be past pristine tales. Contemporary story telling is shamelessly eclectic, and shamelessly contemporary. Shrek is a good example. In children’s stories the talking animals, often somewhat anthropomorphic in nature, echo the shamanic tradition of tutelatory animals. These characters as well remind us of ancient traditions that speak of a ‘unitary time’ when animals and humans shared the same language (Abram 1997).

In advertising fantasy plays a powerful role. There are soft drinks and confections that are presented as possessing consciousness-altering capacities that convey magical powers to the consumer, not infrequently suggest that they are able to transport consumers to a paradise place. There are strange fantastic and animistic creatures speaking on behalf of products, even if, as in the case of Louie the Fly, it is against their best interests. Magic and animism are sufficiently recurrent as themes in product promotion to
suggest that those who design the ads and those who pay for them tacitly agree that something resonates with the audience in a positive way.

**Complex Ideation**

Animism and animistic ideas seem to be inextricably bound with other notions, such as magic, supernormal powers, religious ideas and otherworldly places and supernatural entities. Animist cultures appear to include these other elements along with the purely animist notions. So the presence of the same spectrum of themes within Western popular culture, with a high level of exposure and acceptance should suggest something distinct. It has not been within the scope of this project to quantify the volume of fantastical elements spanning infant to adult life experience (toys, books, movies, Christmas related material, advertising) within contemporary Western culture, but I want to suggest that it is of sufficient volume as to be a significant indicator of something significant about our collective psyche.

It might be that the childhood animism identified by Piaget is a valid observation and that we do not grow out of it so much as sublimate it in conformity with the dominating narrative that expresses ‘civilised’ sentiments. Fraser (1994) explored cultural practices that had persisted into his time, though with diminished primacy within the life of a community. Guy Fawkes night was still celebrated in my childhood, but without any potent sense of what it meant. As children we dimly grasped the notion of the gunpowder plot but we were far more articulate about the explosive potential for mischief that lay in the ‘crackers’ we could buy. Bonfires and explosions activate primal responses, so they are likely to survive in consequence. Fraser noted an ancient communal practice of bonfire lighting reaching back to times when the animistic world-view was far more prevalent.

Modernity and even post-modernity has layered over more ancient worldviews, but it has not extinguished them, nor rendered them inconsequential. The more ancient thoughts, sentiments and reflexes may no longer be prominent as clear ideas serving to articulate and explain the human experience, but it does seem that they continue to play a vital role in releasing or processing psychic energy.

I have spent ten of the past 18 months in hospital recovering from Guillain-Barre Syndrome, a condition that confers sudden and almost total paralysis. My ability to make notes was radically impaired. Sometime during that period I heard a speaker on radio saying that our dreams make us whole. I had not much other than my dreams at that stage so the idea stuck with me. I have evolved this idea into the context of animism.
It may be that the innumerable ways in which the suite of animistic and related ideas seep into our cultural experience, camouflaged as innocent fantasies and the pleasant entertainments of childhood reflect a fundamental need. It may be that unless this need is permitted sufficient free expression we cannot properly experience a genuine sense of psychic wholeness. Fantasy and entertainment are the other side, the ‘yin’ to the ‘yang’ of rational awareness. So they remain within the culture as carriers of the animistic while the overt cultural narrative, blending religious, humanist and scientific discourses denies, essential its ontological validity.

In Christianity we can readily identify hell and heaven as occupying the lower and higher positions, once literally so in the popular consciousness. We can expect that the pervasive influence of Christianity upon the Western psyche will have resulted in lingering influences, even when our culture is seen as predominantly secular. We still speak of a terrible experience being ‘hellish’ and of a pleasant one as ‘heavenly’. In the criminal ‘underworld’ and the realms of ‘stardom’ we may detect classical allusions, but these images retain traction also because they speak to something innate. We talk of ‘low life’ to denote disreputable realms of behaviours, and the ‘high life’ to express rich or opulent lifestyles.

Paradisiacal elsewhere is no longer something that is only a post mortem experience. These days it is ‘heaven on Earth’, even if only for a brief interlude. The magical luxury of a holiday in the sun carries the echoes of the ancient land beyond the horizon, but as a destination for restoration and recreation; and both these terms have connotations of rebirth and (unfortunate) return to the mundane world.

Between the criminal underworld and the privileged high life of ‘stars’ lies the middle world of the mundane life, from which one may, traditionally, escape to the upper levels through virtue and fortune, or descend beneath when neither is present. The same linear moral scheme is echoes in the traditional social classes: lower, middle and upper.

Magical devices

Greenfield’s thoughts concerning the animistic potential of technologies merits further exploration. I want to think about technologies in the sense of enabling the doing of things that could not otherwise be done, and those that make the doing of something easier – saving time and labour. The first time humans picked up a stone to smash a bone to get to the marrow enabled something that could otherwise not be attained by intent. The development of laser surgical techniques has made operations once too perilous to contemplate possible. But the majority of our technologies make the doing easier.
Many devices make it possible to do things that once could be only dreamt of or wished for. Other devices virtually ‘democratise’ the magical and the paranormal. The magical skills that enabled remote transfer of thoughts and sight were once attributed only to wizards, witches and shamans. Now it is possible to use mobile phone and satellite technologies to replicate these feats. There was a time when a person walking down the street animatedly engaged in conversation with no apparent companion would have been thought quite mad (or, more generously, one blessed by a spiritual gift). Now we need to confirm the absence of a Bluetooth earpiece before conferring such a diagnosis.

As well as the animation of technological devices, they are reducing in size and becoming less obtrusive, less evident. The microchip is becoming a pervasive resident in toys and domestic appliances. And as technologies advance the energies they use and the media with which they operate is moving outside the purely physical realm into the fuzzy quantum domain on the boundary of physical existence.

In a very real way technology is oriented toward serving our dreams and allowing us to more fully inhabit our imagination as much as it serves the more evident needs of maintaining and refining our physical existence.

I argue that technology is responding to our innate propensity for both animistic and magical thought. What drives now innovation (especially in computing) may be less a response to the instincts of our physicality and far more a deeper, more primal, and maybe more fundamental, imperative. Palaeoanthropologist Peter McAllister has reviewed the status of the modern male in his book, Manthropology, (Hachette 2009) and argues that, “every man in history, back to the dawn of the species, did everything better, faster, stronger and smarter than any man today.” (from publisher’s website). Technology has certainly been a significant contributor to the decline in our physical prowess, and our appetite for the nonphysical, for the imaginative and the magical, seems undiminished but perhaps more realized and realizable than ever before.

The chief point to make here is that our development of technology has not been confined to the substitution of physically demanding or onerous tasks, enhancing physical pleasures or salving psychological anxieties. I maintain it has been also employed to respond to more complex impulses, including a passion for the magical and animistic. The relatively disproportionate representation of supramundane and supranormal themes among popular movies, for example, suggests the possible presence of an element of human behaviour favouring animistic and magical thought.

I argue that technology seeks to inhabit the dream/imagination-state as a medium through which the fantastic is rendered as drama, as with the popular computer generated animations that perpetuate talking animals, for example, in films like Finding Nemo or fairy stories and folklore like Shrek, or as devices that enable quasi lucid dreaming as with virtual reality devices. Technology is not inventing new places and
spaces so much as making possible mediated access to the ancient ones, albeit as counterfeit, vicarious experience.

Cyber space has become an analogue of an invisible world, and this is nowhere better demonstrated in the present development on on-line worlds such as Second Life, which boasts a population of 7,880,873 residents, of whom 1,763,640 logged in the past 60 days. Second Life provides a comprehensive economic analysis of its residents’ activities, using its own currency, which can be converted to ‘real’ tangible money. This economic activity includes selling parcels of land, of which 6,287 were available for sale. (secondlife.com accessed 8/7/07)

It is in technology that we may find the most potent expressions of the magical and the remnants of religious aspiration. Much of our technology brings attributes of the invisible realm to the physical, seeking to render unobstructed the realm that is naturally obstructed. The dream state, the invisible world, has no time or space as we know it, and no gravity. It is unobstructed. White’s (1940) now classic ‘Unobstructed Universe’ expresses the distinction between physical and non-physical time and space in five essential points:

1. The essence of Time is Receptivity.
2. The essence of Space is Conductivity.
3. The essence of Motion is Frequency.
4. The co-existent trilogy of the obstructed universe (Earth) is Time, Space and Motion.
5. The co-existent trilogy of the unobstructed universe … is Receptivity, Conductivity and Frequency. (1940 p. 59)

The relationship between events/forms expresses differently relative to the medium of manifestation. The essence of White’s argument is that what we perceive as time and space, the material world, is a lower, or denser, analogue of attributes that function within the invisible world. It is these attributes that we witness most lucidly in computer generated ‘worlds’ in cyber space, where the analogue physical world displays apparent space, where none exists, though it is experienced as existing. Here also the time taken for something to happen can be diminished or expanded elastically because none of the process impediments of the ‘real’ lumpy world apply. The relationships between events remain, but they are no longer constrained to conform to material world rules. The ideal of the invisible, unimpeded world has become the ideal of technology.

It is perhaps paradoxical that in an age that is often asserted to be grossly materialistic, we may be witnessing a de-materialisation, as we further engage with the imaginative and magical through devices whose presence is less and less apparent. These same devices are also becoming more and more animated, in appearance at least.
The biological dimension – hard wired for the sacred?

Brain research appears to be confirming ancient knowledge, though there is still an understandable reluctance to admit that there may be another order of reality involved. Instead, it is claimed that the brain still generates the things that would otherwise appear to be ‘unreal’. In terms of scientific method this is entirely appropriate, because the invisible world does not yet routinely register on the instruments of the visible material world.

Research into ‘spiritual’ experiences and into the impact of psychoactive compounds remains at the contentious edge of scientific research. The work done is suggestive to a sympathetic inquirer that further advances will support the assumptions and assertions of ‘believers’. While this may turn out to be the case, I want to go no further than saying that the implications are favourable, and appear not to rule out spiritual interpretations. There is a concern is that reliance on science that is faithful to a conservatively methodological approach can be abused when the evidence is extrapolated to support a hypothesis long before the science is completed. At present the science suggests that anticipations of vindication might be valid, but it by no means has yet served up ‘proof positive’.

That innate human propensity for connection with the other reality that is translated as a religious impulse, or the brain being hardwired for God is now being asserted to be inherent within our biology, in the architecture and chemistry of the brain (Newberg, D’Aquili & Rause 2001; Pearce 2002; Strassman 2001). This has led to interesting speculation on the ‘survival’ values of a biologically determined instinct for the mystical, confined within the ground rules of atheistic Darwinism. Can a propensity for the metaphysical and spiritual be hardwired into the brain to serve entirely biological imperatives?

Newberg et al do see clear physiological and psychological benefits from beliefs and practices of a spiritual nature. They say:

Evidence suggests that the deepest origins of religion are based on mystical experience, and that religion persists because the wiring of the human brain continues to provide believers with a range of unitary experiences … evolution has adopted this machinery, and has favoured the religious capabilities of the brain because religious beliefs and behaviours turn out to be good for us in profound and pragmatic ways. (p. 129)

Strassman’s (2001) work on DMT, which occurs in nature as well as in humans, and to a remarkable degree, hints at the possibility that it may be more than humans who have an inbuilt supply of DMT to assist their communion with the sacred. This would be very much an animistic perspective. If we accept that plants and animals are animate conscious spirit beings with physical counterparts then we cannot rule
out the role of DMT as a means of attaining ‘peak experiences’ across the board, and perhaps more than humans are biologically ‘hard-wired’ for the sacred.

Strassman says of DMT that it:

Provides, regular, repeated and reliable access to “other” channels. The other planes of existence are always there. In fact they are right here, transmitting all the time. But we cannot perceive them because we are not designed to do so; our hard wiring keeps us tuned in to Channel Normal. (pp. 315-6)

Here we have contrasting perspectives, one proposing that the brain is hard-wired to the sacred and the other that it is also hard-wired to the ‘normal’. Both see a common attainment of a unitary state, induced by a number of means, including ingestion of psychoactive substances, ritual methods and intense physical excitation.

It would not be unreasonable to expect that the physical and chemical architecture of the brain would ‘fit’ the experiences that come from the range of ‘spiritual’ experiences, nor that the reports of mystics and shamans would find confirmation through scientific investigation. But interpreting what this means remains deeply contentious. How do we define the benefits of a hard-wired propensity for the sacred in the context of a cultural ontology that has substantially dismissed the heritage of mystical and spiritual thought? Strassman’s position, like that of McKenna & McKenna (1993) is less cautious than Newberg et al, because the latter remain within the boundaries of scientific enquiry that presumes no validity to the assertions of other domains beyond the material. That there is a fit between the shamanic and mystical and the science of the brain invites the assumption of validity of knowledge systems derived from such traditions, and perhaps, as research continues the fit and validity issues will be more definitively addressed.

There is potential to explore the nature of the membrane that divides the ‘normal’ from the ‘mystical’, considering the discourses of the grand esoteric and religious systems that promote unitary consciousness as the objective of human endeavour. This might also be matched to the unitary tendencies that appear to be inherent in evolving technologies – especially the emphasis on connectedness and communication.
The monomyth

Campbell asserted that a certain persistent theme was common across the body of human mythology, and he called this the “monomyth. In effect this ‘monomyth’ is the final test of the persistent and pervasive presence of animism in any culture.

To Campbell the monomythic theme arises as “the one shape-shifting yet marvellously constant story that we find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion that more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told.” (1993 p. 3) It operates through myth, which Campbell sees as the “living inspiration of what ever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind.” (Ibid p. 3) And Campbell is bold enough to assert that “…it would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation.” (Ibid p. 3) But it is almost ‘too much to say’ by virtue of saying it is not. Nevertheless Campbell framed a large question: “What is the secret of the timeless vision? From what profundity of the mind does it arrive? Why is mythology everywhere the same, beneath its varieties of costume? And what does it teach? (Ibid p. 4)

In setting out to answer these questions Campbell defines the hero as “a personage of exceptional gifts. Frequently his is honoured by his society, frequently unrecognised or distained. He and/or the world in which he finds himself suffering from a symbolic deficiency.” (Ibid p. 37). The central theme of the monomyth is a ‘journey’ that is “a magnification of the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return.” (Ibid p. 30). In effect, then, the monomyth is the making of the shamanic, the culture hero who undergo “agonising sacrificial torture, death and often dismemberment in the spirit world and subsequent reassembly and rebirth in his earthly body, now equipped with shamanic supernatural power.” (Hancock 2005 p. 271)

The reason that the monomyth and its hero have central concern to cultures is, as Eliade observes, because those who possess the ability to move between the worlds are the vital link in connecting humans on the physical side of the veil with what is beyond. The myths tell the story of the visible and invisible world intersecting and of the journeying to the invisible realms. He says, “these myths refer to a time when communication between heaven and earth was possible; in consequence of a certain event; or ritual fault, the communication was broken off; but heroes and medicine men are nevertheless able to re-establish it.” (1988 p. 133) In short, reconnection has been a pervasive human theme and objective. Regardless of the historical reality we can see that Christianity inflated the Jesus story to match the monomyth. Jesus represents the last monomythic hero who exists in a time of real mythos, regardless of the historical dimension. For Western culture, the AD dating might represent the last symbolic presence of a mythic character believed widely to have been divine. But the fundamental drive of the monomyth persists.
because it is essential to the human psyche. The innate spiritual impulse is towards what the hero/shaman can do. But because we cannot all be heroes and shamsans, the stories that mirror the monomyth assure us that somebody can.

In the West the monomyth is alive and well, though in a somewhat materialistic or secular form. It lives on in Superman, who has superhuman powers but the flaw of susceptibility to Kryptonite. Superman is the hero of the industrial age, and there is no overt sense of the mystical in him. The hero is Luke Skywalker with the ability to draw power from ‘The Force’, and whose hand his father cut off. In a strange kind of way the hero is also Star Trek’s android, Data, who is a humanist version of the mythic hero. He possesses the superhuman powers of a robotic brain, and is flawed in the lack of ability to experience human emotions, and therefore to be fully human. In numerous other ways truncated and embellished versions of the monomyth play out in dramas on television and movie theatres. The journey may be only to defeat the ‘bad guys; and the supernatural powers are really only supernormal – to a secular sense, the supernatural has to be encoded, and may be no more than flash weapons or powers concocted in a computer. But that is enough. The good guy suffers and struggles against evil, and restores good to the world, children to their parents or freedom to the oppressed. These are costume dramas that colour the monomyth in the appropriate cloth of belief and believability of a culture and an age.

**Does animism persist?**

I have argued that there are fundamental continuances of the essential elements of animism in Western culture from diverse sources, historical and contemporary and that it seems as if this way of knowing seeks and finds expression as cultural contexts permit it do so. It seems to be present as an innate undercurrent permeating the superstructure of time and circumstance through available forms and avenues. It also appears to be spontaneously celebrated as a valued component of human life, especially childhood.

The celebration of the animistic stage of childhood, as described by Piaget, should, I think, give us pause. Not only are inanimate objects accorded animate attributes but ‘imaginary friends’ are present. It is difficult to imagine that there is any utility of evolutionary or survival value in such a stage without there being some deeper underpinning factor. It is adults who enable, perpetuate, develop and market the plethora of animistic childhood orientated things. Is this just an honouring of childhood or capitalisation upon it? Or could there be that in adults the animistic phase is subverted, rather than transcended and the things of childhood cannot be put away until they are honoured and integrated?
The first toy I bought my grandson was a truck, chosen for its sturdy construction and functionality. It was only later that I discovered eyes on the windscreen and mouth, of simple linear design, on the grille. The effect was that of happy endeavour. I am not sure he noticed it as he subjected the toy to his robust and ill-coordinated pleasure. Nevertheless the eyes and mouth signified something to the designer.

As I write these notes I am sitting at a footpath table outside my favourite café in Katoomba. My coffee has arrived in a blue mug with eyes, a bump for a nose and a mouth. The ‘emotion’ conveyed is that of anxious concern. The eyes are downcast, playing over the page of my notebook, and I might be induced to think the mug is gazing on my words, thinking, “What are you thinking? How could you possibly think that? Are you mad?” This is not a child’s thing, but it is playful, perhaps a comic code acknowledging some secret animistic thought, with which I am invited to engage.

This makes me wonder, also, about the names of football teams – sharks, tigers, lions, panthers, bulls, dragons, and eagles. It is as if we are responding to some innate impulse to evoke totemic animal images as emblematic of male potency. It is no less than we do in ordinary speech, invoking animal characteristics to convey particular meaning – chicken, dog, goat, ass, rat and turkey come immediately to mind. Are we acknowledging, outside the formal and rational ontological discourses, that there are some things that are meaningful and powerful and effective, that are best drawn from a now seemingly remote history of our development? Or have we not really transcended the animism of childhood or our ancient heritage? Guthrie sees similar things, adding that we name cars and planes after animals and birds. He concludes that, “Animism, then, seems intrinsic to perception.” (Ibid p. 61)

Jay Griffiths (2007) probably grasps the challenge of Charlton’s recovered animism more than most in the publication of Wild: an Elemental Journey. She confirms the apparent universality of the essential animistic precepts, struggling to endure within surviving traditional indigenous cultures in the 21st Century, against the ineluctable encroachment of Western culture, but mostly yielding and diminishing with great sadness, as if something monumental and profound is being lost.

Griffiths starkly articulates the fundamental dilemma the contemporary Western way presents to those within it, and of it, who are sensitive to the bleak dichotomy that has evolved between civilisation and nature. For though the homo-centric Western way has striven to become a full system that embraces and satisfies the need for mythos, or to eradicate it as ‘irrational’, fit only for gentle indulgence as fantasy, the boundary is porous, and yearning for the natural, the wild, the animistic has not abated.

She says of the dwellers in the Amazon “they will tell you of different ways of knowing. The Western way, they say, is merely theoretical; their own way is better, for it is both spiritual and practical, involving a constant moral dimension that includes a respect for nature”. (p. 16) It is this moral dimension, the respect for nature that lies at the centre of a culture that generates the divide between the Western way and
those ways it has encircled and constricted. The animistic sense is at the root of the distinction. Griffiths says that:

Amazonian people speak of spirits everywhere in the forests. The Kukama people say there are spirits in the streams, lakes, salt licks, and in small garden plots.

One Shawi man comments, “We Shawi think that every living thing has its own spirit.” For a Shiwilu man, Fidel Lomas Chota, there is a connection between wildness and spirit; domesticated plants don’t have any spirit, but by contrast las frutas sylvestres, wild fruits, have spirits, and everything in el monte (the wild forest) has a dueño, spirit. (Ibid pp. 44-5)

The idea that spirits are absent from ‘denatured’ place is common, as Griffiths found, with the same sentiment being expressed among Papuans and among the Inuit. It is as if the natural spirits are displaced, excluded or simply depart when the moral dimension of human conduct loses connection with the natural world, even if it is the simple erection of a fence or intentional gardening. (My partner, a naturopath, prefers ‘wild crafted’ herbs as opposed to farmed ones, and similar preferences are expressed in relation to such as fish and game animals by those of discerning tastes.) The notion of a moral dimension, a sense of lawfulness is central to traditional culture, but not laws conceived by humans, rather how humans respond to the natural world. “For indigenous people, Law is the land and Nature is anything but lawless; rather there is a profound core of order within wild nature.” (Ibid p.228) Griffiths catalogues this notion of ‘natural law’, saying:

This universal law, or Way is Asha in Zoroastrian thought, Maat for the ancient Egyptians, R’ta in Vedic India, Dharma for Hindus and Buddhists, the Tao in ancient China. For the Greeks, Themis was goddess of law, the law of nature as distinct from human law (and when Themis is disregarded Nemesis brings retribution). The deep law of nature was Maligait for the Inuit, it was Wouncage, the old way, for the Oglala Lakota and the Dreaming for Aboriginal people. They are all expressions of a profound Law beneath everything, a Way of being. Wildness, nature, freedom and law are all part of this Way, not in opposition to it. Wildness – complex, free, beautiful and only apparently chaotic – is part of a larger deeper order.(Ibid p 288).

Griffiths summaries the wounding dichotomy that has emerged in Western thought. She observes that “Terms for sin and evil were taken from the natural world … Terms for sinners were also terms taken from nature … By contrast, the words for virtue do not lean to nature but to the off-ground sky.” (Ibid p. 247)

Redfield (1968) makes a related point concerning the transition from ‘primitive’ to civilised life, saying that: “The point which we are to insist … is that in the early condition of human societies, the nexus which held people to together was moral.” (Ibid p.28) and that “…every pre-civilized society of the past fifty or seventy-five millenniums had a moral order to which the technical order was subordinate.” (p.30) Redfield’s concern is that foundation of values alters as the conditions and nature of human activity changes. He observes that, “In civilization the old moral order suffers, but new states of mind are
developed by which the moral order is, to some significant degree, taken in charge.” (Ibid p. 37) The new states of mind take charge of the moral order through thought and language, as well as the priorities of conduct.

Griffiths recognises the Earth – Heaven dichotomy, engraved into language and thought, conditioned by tradition that reaches back into the very foundations of Western culture. We can see the Greek influence, when rationalism established the distinction between what is valued and what is not. She says:

To the Greeks the city was a way of thinking and represented rationality. The city-state was associated with (male) reason and contrasted with (female) irrationality of the wilderness. The city, with its plumb lines and right angles, represented the straight lines of logic, not the winding ways of intuitive emotional thought.

The city represents law and order (the word police derives from Greek polis, “town”, while the “villains” dwell in lawless wild nature outside. The word villain (a Middle English variant of villein, “peasant”) once meant a rustic and the root of the word is in villa – originally the word was merely a simple description of where someone dwelled. The word gradually shifted, coming to mean criminal. (Ibid pp. 34-5)

Thought and language construct a sense of reality for those who live within a culture, and, even if the act is unconscious, and the offence unintended, the perpetuation and preservation of words perpetuates the logic of their evolution. Those ideas and words whose evolved use evokes a shifting set of values can be traced, as Griffiths demonstrates, into a hard polarity – the feminine, natural and Earthly and the masculine, rational and Heavenly.

Griffiths also recognises the central role of the scared mountain, saying that “All over the world, mountains have been considered sacred – it seems to be a human constant.” (Ibid p. 314) But not only are mountains the dwelling place of gods, the home of the spirits of the deceased, the refuges of the rebellious, the mystical and the holy, they are emblematic of the elemental, of wild nature, where Earth and Heaven come together. While Griffiths does not survey Eliade’s notion of the surrogate sacred mountain as the ziggurats and pyramids of human fiat, her central thesis makes it possible to grasp the degree to which the human-made, conceived in the linearity of geometry, and located within the city, constitutes an absolute capture and transformation of iconic image of natural spiritual energy. Here we can imagine the first fault-lines, the initial forces of separation, of the creation of the enduring dichotomy.

The classical, Taoist text, the Tao Te Ching, says “The ways of men are conditioned by those of earth. The ways of earth by those of heaven. The ways of heaven by those of the Tao, and the ways of the Tao by the Self-so.” (Waley, p 26 1997). The traditional animistic ways are emphatically Earth-centred. Griffiths observed that:
For the Amazonian people there are spirits or essences within reality, and this essence takes different forms – human, bird or animal – but since the essence is the same, the spirit in one form can transform into another form – a kind of Ovidian metamorphosis known throughout the forests. The same life force is in everything, animating you and the eagle, the glossy leaf and the kingfisher, the jaguar and me.

Creatures are gentle I’m told, everywhere I go in the Amazon: they are “people like us” with customs and homes and they are accorded gentleness for being gentle. You must address the world gently, I was told, even to the wind you should speak con cariño – with tenderness. The Harakmbut told me that all animals were people más allá - long ago – and there is a profound equality between us and them. (Ibid p. 57)

This fundamental fellow-feeling at the root of indigenous and traditional Law generates a profound response to perceptions of Western conduct. “Yuri Rytkheu comments that in many Chukchi legends, the words for “white man” and “enemy” are synonymous. The newcomers were identified “as the physical embodiment of the evil spirits, as the personification of avarice and contempt for the rules of human conduct.” (Ibid p.132). Trudgen (2000) says the Yolnu people of the Northern Territory saw Europeans as “lawless” and yet with tremendous power. And Campbell saw that heaven became the source of a new way of knowing. Heaven-centred knowledge did appear to alter the way some humans saw the Earth, seeing it no longer as a scared being or presence from which they derived the essentials for life, but as a resource to be exploited and transformed, redeemed into the model of heaven. The idea that Western ontology developed into a sub-set that is lawless in relation to the long tradition of ontologies that linked human/Earth relations in a complex and intimate way is one I think we need to consider deeply.

What Griffiths essentially demonstrates is that no matter the degree to which the animistic architecture can be found within Western culture, it is constructed on a logic that is fundamentally at odds with those who continue within, or cling to the remnants of, life ways that intimately bind human being and behaviour to the Earth. The progressive emergence of ‘Heaven’ as the source of Law seems to have had the effect of ‘cutting out the middle man’: humans, rather than deriving Law from Earth in the Taoist sense, sought to draw Law directly from heaven. The development of science, especially its evolution from the advent of quantum theory, and more so with the development of chaos, complexity and systems theories is enabling a rethink of human/Earth relations. This is also happening at a time when disastrous ecological concerns are inviting us to rethink the way we are interacting with natural systems.

The promise of Heaven seems to have played out its drama over five millennia or longer. The bubble that began as the establishment a connection between the human and the divine atop a surrogate mountain has expanded to create a human-made realm within which we are perfectly adapted as members of the Western culture. In its own way it has become a model, a mimic of a larger system, now expelled, following the principles of self-organisation.
Griffiths sees that wildness has not been banished from civilised humans, rather it has been confined and shaped. And while it seems to have been tamed, rendered docile, it does simmer, like Bates’ sleeping dragons, and shimmer with potential.

If our culture, our way of knowing, despite being a seeming bubble of ontological hubris, remains fundamentally modelled on an innate architecture, if Charlton is right (in company with Guthrie) in his assertion that “Consciousness just is animistic”, then Griffiths may offer us something that is valuable in her comment, that after the seven years journeying to experience and to write Wild, “In the end – a strangely sweet result – I came back to a wild home.” (Ibid p.3)

Of all I had read, Griffiths’ work touched me most deeply, throwing me back into memories of wild places of my childhood, and how I found a natural ‘fit’ in solitary wandering along creek beds or sea shores, often to my parents’ consternation. On my most recent birthday (Jan 22nd) I had an unexpected call from my stepfather, a man of deep Pentecostal commitment. He reminded me of something I had forgotten, of how I had numerous times ‘gone bush’ and simply had forgotten to go home. It bought back memories of how every wild place, no matter how, small, even a vacant block in our suburb, drew me. I would spend hours observing, sometimes closely, small creatures or a waterway that trickled through tangles of blackberry and weeds.

I wrote to Griffiths on 15 September 2007 to thank her for the book, saying, in part:

I don’t propose Goddess as a literal idea (not saying it isn’t either), but I do see clearly that it is a perfect archetypal metaphor that enables the creation of a coherent and workable thought/feeling model. What ‘Wild’ did for me was to give that idea the clothing of human passion, the shape formed from raw experience. It breathed life into it. Thank you. You reminded me what I had almost let become dulled – that visceral sense of being in the presence of the wild world.
Conclusion

How has the research addressed the thesis questions?

I asked the two key research questions:

- How do I make sense of non-ordinary experience on a personal level?
- Could I find a way of fitting my experiences within my parent culture’s ontological narrative?

The personal

All three recounted experiences that illustrate the precipitation into deep ontological crisis can be accommodated within the spectrum of ideas that constitute animism. That is to say that certain conditions or circumstances may lead to non-ordinary events occurring as a consequence of animate agencies intruding into the ‘normal’ realm of personal reality – conditioned by a cultural ontological frame to deny or reject such things. In this respect animism provides a wider paradigm that makes such experiences possibly valid – they can happen. I know they did.

However this explanation should not extend to the role of giving personal ‘meaning’ to the experiences. That something can happen and did happen does not explain why it did happen. The “Why me?” question can be answered within the frame of animism, but at a more personal level of asking what possible relationships exist between me and the range of possible intelligent agencies. This opens up deeper issues of meaning and reason that remain unresolved. In seeking an answer to the question “Why did these things happen to me?” I needed to ask “Of what possible benefit is the precipitation of an ontological crisis?” One answer is that it generated the motive force for a journey of discovery, arriving at, for the moment, this research project. This suggests the possibility of meaningful and purposeful experiences may be had long before meaning or purpose can be discerned. But this supposes ‘meaning’ to life of a bigger stage, for
which I have offered no evidence or argument. It is a choice, irrational maybe, that I elect to make in order have some sense, no matter how illusory it may ultimately be, of coherence, of meaning. So my focus has been not on ‘why’ but whether there is the prospect of intellectual validation.

I spent a good deal of time thinking about crisis experiences, including reading extensively on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I wondered whether there was any necessary distinction between what I had been through and any other kind of critical incident, and concluded that there was not, at least in terms of the sense of disruption and dislocation. The precipitation of ontological crisis in consequence of uninvited and disruptive non-ordinary phenomena, or as the unanticipated by-product of intentional acts, is almost a cliché. Life changing experiences are not rare. There are innumerable challenging or catastrophic events that precipitate the experiencer into a crisis of meaning. That my experiences were of the paranormal variety marks them as perhaps extraordinary, but the drama that followed is not especially remarkable, save that it was expressed in a peculiar context and related to a particular theme. The realisation that I was, in effect, just another person struggling to make sense of a dramatic intrusion into my life was a sobering and necessary thing.

The cultural

The idea of animism permeating sacred and secular thought, as a ‘natural’ consequence of awareness and perception, suggests to me that I can locate my struggle for meaning making within my cultural paradigm. Of course it cannot be located within that aspect that insists on the fundamental ‘error’ of animism (or anthropomorphism) or persists in denial of the paranormal. But there is a significant community of those who are exploring deeper meaning and other ways of knowing, and here it has a natural place.

From the time I began to undergo the drama of ontological crisis in the early 1970s many deep shifts in knowledge and values have altered the cultural landscape. Nevertheless there is still the risk of inhabiting the pluralistic environment as an isolate, bound off by beliefs, language, practices and hubris that mark one as not a full member of the wider community, save in the sense of tolerated inclusion. This was the risk I saw in the Western Mystery Tradition, and later in Wicca. The danger of set specific beliefs, ideas and language is that of inflating one’s particular set to precedence, as if it has universal, rather than a context-based virtue. The merits of ideas risk being lost in the accoutrements of groups and cultures, as if the ideas belong, natively, to the set. Each individual map is but a perspective of common country, and none, of themselves, are wholly representative.

Exclusion and the denial of validity of experiences or ideas serve a critical function of defining membership of a set, group, community or culture. But when cultures become complex they lose their
homogeneity, or their illusion of such, and learning this was an important lesson for me. I could belong, but I had to understand better the complexity of the culture in which I lived.

The fact that Western culture is in need of revising its ontological frame is, I think, well enough established. Being a participant in that revision might be a good way to see myself. Cultural revision begins at the level of personal experience, so I might be permitted to think that my experiences are part of a larger cultural movement towards revision.

I have located my experiences within a common and knowable domain that is animism, though it is a fragmented, blurred and contested domain. I have resolved the dilemma occasioned by my dramatic, disruptive and dislocating non-ordinary experiences in relation to how I fit within my cultural narrative by showing that there is a coherent pathway of thought that functions within my culture and which is exploratory and creative.

I have not set out to create an alternative ontology, but have sought to resolve apparent conflicts and mutually exclusive contradictions in a way that privileges no particular cultural frame. In the course of inquiry the contingencies and contextual cautions that were identified in the methodology have shown to be consistently relevant across the spectrum of ideas encountered in the research of literature.

Western ontology is not homogenous, but complex and context sensitive and full of power plays for dominance, or, at least, acceptability. Certain elements have attained dominance because they reflect practical, utilitarian and pragmatic responses to changing human needs, especially for material stability, and especially in the political and economic domains, with resultant impact upon intellectual and cultural areas. At the edges of those public domains the ‘spiritual’ continues to interact and contend with the formation and perpetuation of discourses on identity, relationship and meaning where material and non-material imperatives intersect and interact.

The dominant materialist ontology has established particular notions about the nature of identity, relationship and meaning in relation to the Earth (and Heaven if one considers the ‘materialistic’ aspects of religious thought), and these appear to be unsustainable and harmful. There is an emerging vigorous and contentious dialogue that represents a vital perpetuation of an ancient endeavour – to engage with and understand the physical and metaphysical domains, and how they intersect within the lifeworld of human experience.

My initial attempts at validation and defence were tentative and self-protective, but as my examination of meaning-giving cultural discourses progressed I found a location that enabled and preserved my sense of full membership of my culture. This seems to reflect an evolutionary progression common to historically excluded discourses, as might be seen with feminist, queer, disability and multicultural voices.
A reflection on the possible role of animism

I have sought to establish a chain of argument that works through the consequences of the experience of radically disruptive non-ordinary events and towards a theoretical position that locates them within a rational ontological construct that does not demand fleeing from my parent culture. The initial drama of experience was matched by the dislocating problem of not being able to find a fit for it within the ontological frame of the ‘normal’ world of my culture’s ontology.

The sense of ‘misfit’ within my culture and the dilemma concerning how to remain within it or seek the solace of systems based in other cultures turned out to be an illusion, the product of my own ignorance and naivety. The ontology of Western culture is not homogenous, but a dynamic constantly changing and evolving environment. It is, however, dominated by large forces that contend for supremacy, and which oppress and exclude other voices. This includes suppression and oppression of perceived opponents. But the culture is also permeable and porous, adoptive and adaptive and this enables the struggle for acceptance, toleration and validation by minority or non-conforming voices to progress.

The struggle for personal validation of direct lived experience, especially that which intrudes upon and challenges the universality of the dominant ontological prescriptions and proscriptions, is an ongoing dynamic that has great potency in the present age. Individual lived experience, and the validation of non-conforming knowledge, is now honoured as the age of individualism matures. The implications for shared experience are less ‘scientific’ and more human-centred, concerning shared and mutual understanding and engagement. This reflects a wide appreciation of the complexity and uncertainty of knowledge itself, and more so as it applies to the human experience.

The object of this thesis was to work through the journey of attempting to reconcile the experiences and resolve them into a coherent ontological frame that may have meaning and validity to the Western mind. The focal point for doing so was the idea of animism. The essential precepts of animism accorded with my direct experiences, both the involuntary ones and those later intentionally sought, but the idea of animism itself did not present itself as a cohering idea until at a much later stage.

Animism, when explored in greater detail, presented a more complex and coherent thought system than in its popularly conceived aspect: as a primitive and erroneous knowledge system that rightly belonged an earlier evolutionary stage of the human psyche. As the concept was expanded, it became evident that the essential precepts of animism had a home in contemporary Western culture on many levels – unconscious and reflexive as well as intentional.
Anthropologists and psychologists see that animism, along with anthropomorphism, permeates Western thought and worldview. Some see that animism is virtually fundamental to human consciousness and perception. I argue that this persistent attribute might be understood as Animistic Consciousness, an innate human propensity to see the world in animistic terms, whether wholly within the human mediated sphere of civilisation or in relation to the natural world. This suggests to me a psychic analogue of the reptilian brain that functions at an unconscious and instinctive level to maintain the physical human body, and without whose continued operation that physical body would cease to function. I propose an equal level of consciousness that has an equally vital function - that of maintaining essential human psychological functions of relationship, identity and meaning – in relation to the material world [especially the natural], and the immaterial domains.

While we might consider the reptilian brain as primitive, we would not consider advocating its eradication and replacement with a new improved version. Instead we live with, and honour its role in maintaining our essential physical presence in the world. I suggest a similar attitude towards the fundamental mechanism of our psychic well-being would be appropriate. Animistic consciousness links us to our world, and beyond the human mediated to the natural. At the deepest level it participates in the sense of fellow feeling with other lives and acknowledges a larger sense of living being than might be otherwise evident to the rational senses.

Cultures that share animism also share a sense of a binary nature of reality, and especially the presence of an inhabited and interactive realm beyond the physical. We can see how this natural apprehension, denied unfettered expression, finds expression in analogue of imagination and now in the conception of cyberspace. The challenge is not so much accepting the idea of an inner realm, but accepting the reality of it. The reliance on physical sciences as the primary authoritative determinant of what is real has arisen, in part, because the failure of religion to maintain a credible narrative on the realm in relation to which it has asserted supreme authority – a gatekeeper of experience and knowledge. As a consequence the methodologies of science have set the limits at the boundary of the physical world. So we have become accustomed to living without knowledge of what is beyond it.

For the most part living without that knowledge has not been evidently problematic because when the inner world has intruded it has been contained through diagnoses of madness, acceptance of error, accommodation of occasional strangeness, and tolerance of religion. Secret beliefs or removal into a subset community of shared ‘secret’ knowledge have also been accommodated and tolerated where eradication has not been effective. But on the other hand it has enabled the mythic inflation of elements of the material world to act in a substitutional manner as surrogates of essentially metaphysical functions. The apparent ultimate failure of this inflation has become one of the ‘hungers’ now seeking satiation in non-traditional and contentious ways.
Animism in this context needs to be ‘recovered’ in Charlton’s sense, and it needs also to be honoured as an experience and respected as a discourse or narrative – as a natural heritage. And for those who choose animism as a philosophy it needs to be accorded due respect.

Animism has the potential to re-engage physical being with a sense of the sacred and the numinous, to extend meaning and value into secret domains beyond appearances.

**Further research possibilities**

There is little evidence of contemporary systematic thinking about Animism in what I’d consider a sympathetic manner. Harvey (2006) is sympathetic but essentially redefines animism, creating a ‘new’ interpretation. It has its merits in that it appears to enable engagement with elements with animistic ideation without having to deal with the ‘metaphysical’ side of it. Harvey asserts that he is, in fact, rescuing Animism from disrepute and I’d agree he is, but only partially, though usefully. Guthrie (1995) addresses animism as a perceptual strategy, but from a squarely atheistic position, thus reinterpreting it against a default ‘scientific’ context of anthropological inquiry. The difficulty with Guthrie’s position is, however, that the scientific model of inquiry does not properly extend into this domain. The scientific disciplines of examining human being and conduct are not yet accompanied by a fully-fledged science of human experience. That is to say there is no actual scientific examination of whether spirits exist or not. Neither is there exploration of what the experience of spirits might be as if such spirits were real. Guthrie theorises on what the experience would be if they were not. Thus we are dealing with speculative thought: theory based upon opinion based upon certain assumptions. It is fully useful only if the assumptions can be supported by evidence and hold to be true. Otherwise what we have is interesting scholarship with limited practical application.

In contrast to Harvey and Guthrie, Frankfort et al (1946) and Radin (1957) exhibit a certain comfort with spiritual and magical ideas in their examination of ancient and “primitive” thought. Here aspects of the animistic experience are thought through rather than redefined, and this is because the root premise is accepted (that there is a spiritual domain, though this also is an assumption). These inquirers share an acceptance of the spiritual as a given in human thought and experience. It is the obverse of rational or scientific atheism. The debates are about method and interpretation. Frankfort asserts that the ancients saw the world as a ‘Thou’ as opposed to the post-Cartesian ‘It’. Radin disagrees, arguing that this is a kind of armchair misinterpretation that relied upon mistaken perceptions and interpretations of inquirers locked in the vice grip of ethnocentricity, albeit unconsciously so. However he does not actually articulate precisely an alternative proposition. Radin criticises Tylor in this respect. While Radin is no doubt also subject to criticism he does exhibit remarkable and sensitive insight into magical methodology, and hence his ability
to interpret evidence is, in my view, superior. Neither Frankfort nor Radin offer any critique of Animism per se. Their values lies solely in exploring animistic ideation in a sympathetic manner and within a greater context of intellectual and philosophical thought.

If we take a time line from Tylor to Harvey at either extreme, and Radin in the middle, animistic ideation has been employed to many ends. It has penetrated, but not permeated, our culture as an evocative descriptor whose precise meaning is not always clarified. It’s use is artistic rather than rational. On the other hand the experience of what Tylor called Animism appears to permeate our lived experience. This certainly seems to me to be true at a cultural level and, I would argue, at an individual level the experience varies from the mild and benign to the radical and disruptive, even catastrophic. There is, however, no disciplined or structured examination of common experience, so my comments are impressionistic. The challenge is to define what constitutes an animistic experience and then search for it. I would anticipate that such an inquiry might well demonstrate that there is a greater level of experience than admitted or spoken of. The ghosts and spirits of Tylor’s inquiry retain a persistent presence in contemporary fantasy and in ‘folk’ reportage.

There are related ideas. This is, for me, one of the most exciting domains for further inquiry, and also probably the most contentious. Animistic thought is bound up with the notion of another world – the proper domain of spirits, the realm of dreams, the territory of the shaman; and to which we might fruitfully add the domain of imagination. There are two questions – whether this elsewhere is as substantive as is reckoned within animistic thought and whether it has any role to play as a source of affect upon our familiar reality. We are accustomed to dismissing this realm as “just” imaginary but on the other hand accept it as the repository of archetypal psychic forces. I am not presently aware any sympathetic studies that embrace the full potential extension of this vital element of human consciousness.

Various thinkers touch upon it. Redfield (1968) distinguishes between moral and technical orders of human experience in his consideration of the distinction between ‘primitive’ and ‘civilised’ living. Armstrong (2001) explores ideas of mythos and logos in order to articulate the differing kinds of consciousness in her exploration of religious thought. Frankfort (1946) considers the emergence out of mythopoetic consciousness into rational thought, a theme also explored by Jeynes (2000) as the emergence of consciousness itself. So some see distinguishing states of consciousness that may denote degrees and types of development or evolution or attunement.

In spiritual and religious thought there is widespread thought of other dimensions of being. There is, in short, a near universal acknowledgement of another domain to human experience. It might be called the mythopoetic imaginal realm rich in moral energy (here I wish to distinguish a certain kind of dynamism that concerns itself with issues of conduct – the virtuous or ennobling actions as well as fears and failures). This domain appears to be fundamental to animistic thought. That is; it appears to be a necessary
companion to human life experience. It is part of the lifeworld of the ‘primitive’ Animist and it is part of the lifeworld of even the sophisticated atheistic Westerner. There are, I think, clues to suggest that there may be an essential psychic architecture to this domain. It may be that we have, in the contemporary West, evolved so that the locus of our consciousness is no longer substantially located in this mythopoetic domain, but it is a different and possibly perilous thing to argue that it no longer exerts a vital or fundamental influence upon us. In fact Newberg et al (2001) comment on the value of religious ideation in life in contributing to our health psychological.

There is a certain desire from dedicated rationalists to see human destiny as entirely liberated from the legacies of instinctual and mythopoetic impulses. This is an extreme view that champions what is conceived as reason as the highest and most valued attribute of humanity. At best this is an emergent quality confined to a few extraordinary individuals. The general human condition, from the tenacious remnants of traditional cultures to the urban sophisticates of Western culture, remains true to both instinctual and mythopoetic impulses, as much as it is responsive to reason. This fundamental trilogy remains the essential constituents of the human lifeworld for the time being.

The advent of sophisticated technologies have enabled not an orgy of rational and reasoned content in movies or on television but a ‘bringing to life’ of the fantastical in evermore elaborate forms. We mine the potential of our mythopoetic heritage to construct popular entertainment of increasingly compelling character. And we ‘animate’ these same technologies with presently rudimentary smarts as if we are driven by a desire to render our servant machines intelligent and capable of communication as if they were fellow animate beings. Here we may perceive a convergence of high reason expressed in the deeply sophisticated technologies and the science that enable them and that ancient imaginal capacity that give a stage to archetypal psychic energies. If our view of this convergence is to lament it, seeing a degradation of fine machines as mere servants of whimsy and fantastical irrational nonsense then we risk divorcing two remarkable human attributes – the rational and the imaginal. If we rather permit the marriage of both then the intellectual prowess we apply to one we might also apply to the other.

But this requires genuine free inquiry, not engaging with ideas bound about by pre-conditions that insist upon an assumption of atheism as the responsible and rational default position. In my view the presently scattered and fragmentary engagements with animistic ideation do not, come close to tapping the potential for examination and exploration of the subject matter.

There are a number of areas of particular interest on a more concrete level.

We can explore the kind of animism that is bound implicitly within religious and spiritual practices not traditionally widely accepted within the ‘old’ West. There is a growing multicultural element within the ‘new’ West (no longer dominated by a singular ethnic, cultural and religious bloc) whose religious
traditions are steeped in animistic thought and practice. Added to this is the growth in Pagan and Shamanic practices and thought among members of the ‘old’ West.

Animistic thought is finding a place in the environmental movement, as it seeks ideas and language that better articulate emergent values and ideas. Mack has argued for a ‘new psychology’ to express such values and ideas as core and key to a needed change in attitudes and conduct. The extent to which such a new psychology is predicated upon animistic ideation based upon a disciplined conception of Animism is not something I’ve explored. The extent to which a psychology (as a science) is influenced by a philosophy in the context of the various permutations of animistic ideation might be usefully explored.

Urban animism offers the opportunity to explore how we vest living significance and meaning within whatever environment becomes our ‘natural habitat’. If animism is an innate impulse then it will apply as a mode of perception whether the environment is ‘natural’ or human-made. In design and art, in planning and in conceptualisation of the built environment as the dominant domain of human experience there is a potential to merge inanimate and organic elements into a unified discourse. We may comprehend a human-centred animism describing the built human-mediated environment in terms of the ghosts and spirits of history.

The other area potentially rich in opportunity for inquiry is technology. We create devices, systems and media in response to desire and need. But how we interpret that desire and need depends upon what assumptions we have made about our nature. In some ways designers are employing the potential implicit in technologies to impose a new kind of animism on us. Machines are engaging us, drawing us in to animistic relationships. I perceive a metaphysics of the machine that can help us explore extension of the human domain beyond the physical – engaging with the energies operating on the sub-strata of material existence. Is it entirely co-incidental that it is animistic analogues that take us there?

Animism is but a portion of the wider prospect of validation of an innate propensity for the spiritual/religious that may be confirmed in brain and other scientific research fields. If this transpires we will have to rethink a good deal of what constitutes knowledge about our psychology.

Despite the dominant Western aversion to the metaphysical and the spiritual humans have persistently demonstrated a profound responsiveness to ideas and values that transcend the physical. It may be a response to a genetic heritage that bids us obedience to the greater good of the species. But this shared survival imperative has its own metaphysical implications. We do not yet understand the root of our motives for noble and self-sacrificing actions. Animism, as a pervasive and universal aspect of consciousness, may be a vehicle for penetrating that mystery more deeply.
Guthrie illustrates perhaps the most critical and interesting potential for future research. He surveys the range of ideas that ‘explain’ animism and anthropomorphism in terms of error, whether of a cognitive or interpretative kind. The view is that humans have evolved from error to superior, and maybe even correct, interpretation of experiences and perception. This, however, demonstrates only one way of considering the evidence. Under an alternative philosophical orientation the apparently innate propensity for humans to see the world in animistic or anthropomorphic terms might be a response to the way things are. What appear as errors or vices under one way of knowing can be seen as truths and virtues under another.

We can perpetuate the now shaky assumption that knowledge has an objective dimension, or we can embrace more completely that notion that knowledge expresses relational and contextual interplays between human experience and perception and the things experienced and perceived. So whether we interpret the world in terms of wrong/right or in terms of context sensitivity – whether in determinative or contingent terms – matters a great deal.

As our culture is enriched through the acceptance of diverse people whose heritages bring knowledge systems and cosmologies the challenge to critically examine the dominant knowledge discourses of the West, already seen to be problematic, must precipitate uncertainty and contention. This can be taken to be a disruptive consequence against which defence must be mounted or an exhilarating opportunity.

I can best sum up my sense of the potential for future research by repeating Guba & Lincoln saying that “we stand at the threshold of a history marked by multivocality, contested meanings, paradigmatic controversies, and new textual forms.” (2005, p.212)

**A final autoethnographic thought**

At the top of Katoomba Street, here in Katoomba, there is a pre-loved bookshop. It is usually closed when I walk past it, in the mornings and evening, to and from the station, on workdays. Today is Saturday and it is early morning. The shop is closed. Almost always I stop a moment to survey the books arrayed in the window. Recently I discovered Brunton’s *Hidden Teachings Beyond Yoga*, a book I had not seen in over 37 years. Today I saw a Hesse and several other volumes that immediately recalled my turbulent years in the early 1970s. The sight of the books threw up powerful images. I could immediately recall the circumstances of reading them.

The bookshop has become a potent time machine that activates images and emotions long since locked away and overlain. The exultation of a new idea, the agony over the wretched struggle to make meaning, the frustration of ignorance, and those occasional blissful moments of the sweet illusion of comprehension.
– they all come tumbling back. It has seemed to me that over the past few months, especially, these trigger books have appeared in greater profusion, agitating me into a turmoil of thoughts and emotions at a time when I am grappling with the last stages of writing this project.

At the point of ‘enough’, when one knows it is time to abandon something and leave it to fend for itself in the world, the shop window has become an elegant articulation of beginning and ending – the commencement of my journey is now before me as I come to an end – going far does mean returning, so it seems. And as I write this on January the 19th 2008 I am also suddenly struck with the fact that it is three days before my birthday, and two days shy of the tenth anniversary of my mother’s death – another potent articulation of ending and beginning.

Suddenly I am thrown back to a day in the mid 1970s. I am travelling by car from Strahan to Hobart. My wife is driving. There is a sudden strong gust of wind and debris is driven across the road in front of us. I say “Merlin has just died.’ She laughs. She hates it when I do this. “How do you know?” She asks, because she has to, not because she wants to know. “The world just told me.” The conversation flags, and I note the time. When I get back to Strahan I confirm Merlin was shot just about then. Merlin was a stray blue heeler who adopted us. He was smart and spirited and a mischief-maker. He was harassing chooks in company with other dogs when he was shot.

The world often ‘speaks to me’, so I see the shop window as a point where it and I intersect in a dialogue about my project. Sometimes it seems that, John, the shop owner, collaborates by provocatively arraying the books and titles to trigger a potent thought or emotion for my journey, or, as today, spur me to scrawl in my notebook over an early morning coffee.

Of course I may not mean that John is a collaborator in any sensible sense, as if there is an external truth to the notion. Rather the dynamics of the bookshop window is a nexus between me and something else, and it is where my sense of self chooses to find meaning. De Quincey’s notion of self as choice and Briggs’ & Peat’s moments of bifurcation meld to allow me to choose to be reflectively and creatively responsive to what I see. The content in the widow must be there as much as the permitting of potentialities must be there in me. I have a degree of freedom in interpretation only because I let scope of possible meanings find its own horizon.

At a certain level of metaphysical thought whether the cosmos is or is not animate, or is or is not meaning drenched, is an unanswerable and pointless question. Reason and intellect cannot satisfy a sufficient degree of testing any such hypotheses. And there is sufficient complexity and uncertainty for any such proposition to be lived as if it were true, with a sufficient number of validating experiences to make seem to be true. Choosing one hypothesis or another creates potential interpretations that then influence conduct, and whether one chooses one or the other seems dependent upon influences beyond personal
control. I choose the animated meaning drenched interpretation of the cosmos because it seems to be in my nature to do so, and because my life experiences have orientated me towards such a choice. It is a choice potential that I can go with or struggle against, and the more I go with it the happier I seem to be.

This does not suppose that there is an external truth or an entirely internal one, but rather a truth that intersects and interacts across the self/other boundary. A key thought that emerged for me in the course of the research project was that of how senses of identity, meaning and relationship work in concert to create a sense of what is real. I cannot say whether the cosmos is animate or whether it is meaning drenched, or whether it matters whether it is or not. But what I can say is that for my sense of identity, meaning and relationship it seems to matter a great deal, and hence I choose what matters to me.

What has emerged for me in the course of this project, as the essential ‘take home’ message, is the proposition that humans are naturally imbued with an animistic impulse. Regardless of its status within the collective ontologies and paradigms that constitute the profoundly complex psychic environment of Western culture, it is a birthright, in relation to which we have an innate liberty of choice to leave it latent, unconscious or engage with it actively and creatively in our meaning making endeavours.

If this project has a contribution to make I see that as being a step towards the restoration and healing of permission to make that choice, if it is in one’s nature to be inclined to do so.

**Post script**

A volume I had entitled “A” Transcripts Vol 1 had been had been commenced in the early 1980s. I had intended to undertake the large job of transcribing the 40 odd audio cassettes of recorded conversation between me and the discarnate entity who had spoken through PJ. It was a task I did not finish, and there are only 53 pages completed. It had been the most neglected of my journals as I had penned most of the transcripts in my magical diaries. Towards the end of 2007 I took the leisure of going through it, in case I might find something worthwhile to be included in the project.

On 11 March 1979 I had asked about the voices that had precipitated my drama. This is what I recorded in response to my question:

A: These (are) discarnate entities with whom you have profound psychological links.
Me: Ah, Could you explain.
A: No.

* End *
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