

A SABBATICAL JOURNEY

**Being a brief account of a provincial's six-month sojourn in
the heart of the Empire**

Allan Kaplan, 2002

*“The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity ”
(W.B.Yeats)*

*“Since the end of the nineteenth century the spiritual evolution of
humanity has led toward a more mobile living thinking in which the abstract and fixed relation
of consciousness to language is dissolved. Language becomes more gesture-like in
character as consciousness is filled with colour and image. When this fact of spiritual
evolution is negated in the school system, in the forms of government and in economic
relations, it leads to an unconscious frustration, a frustration which explodes in acts of
violence and war”.*

(From the back-cover blurb to Rudolf Steiner's “ Foundation for
Social Forms”)

Prelude
January 2002,
the village of Philmont, upstate New York

It's almost mid-morning now, and I'm driving the truck back down into the village, after my early hilltop visit to the cows, they being our responsibility – we look after them and we get a roof over our heads in return; now Sue, my beloved, is ill in bed, the numbing cold having found its insidious way into her inner ear, and the cows are all mine for awhile. The truck is huge and battered a dirty grey, a growling mutha of a vehicle which slouches and slides through the snow despite its four-wheel drive and the fact that it actually has six wheels; this is a weatherbeaten haulage job that's seen more winters than it cares to think about. On my hands are filthy but resilient rawhide gloves, my snow boots are full of cow muck and reach up to my knees, my jeans are streaked brown and yellow with old cattle encounters. All around me in the truck are rusted tools and longhandled spades and pitchforks and battered audio cassettes dusty with irrelevance and pretty much crunched underfoot. At my feet sits Saki, the Japanese Akita hound who will attack any dog of any size or persuasion within sight or smell, though she and me have become fast friends; guess I'm not a dog, though I'm stinking like one. Next to me on the seat is a resplendent copy of Goethe's Scientific Writings, and a brand new hardcover of Steiner's "Nature's Open Secret", as well as drawing paper, pencils, and a tree branch or two that I'm using for observation practice – for I'm a dedicated man, and while the cows are munching and if everything else has been done I try to get in a bit of reading or observing, sitting up on that snow white hilltop amidst the bales of hay, while the dog gnaws on old skull bones, and the black cats watch with their yellow eyes and their tails twitching as if in profound condemnation. America can be a bit of alright, it seems, and this sabbatical feels good. But this morning I'm not easy in my soul, and my mind isn't at rest, it heaves like a tide between two poles; there's a disturbance in my thinking like grit in the eye, and I can't seem to shake my head to clear it as the truck tumbles and lurches down the hill, approaching the village like some uncouth behemoth crawling out from the depths of an unimagined sea.

Last night we received this email, telling of the stabbing, back in Cape Town, of Karen's father, Karen being a close friend of ours. Her father was stabbed by an intruder, in the heart, yesterday, and is now in intensive care; it seems, according to the doctors, that while he has had to have open heart surgery, and suffered a heart attack as a result of the stabbing, he was 'lucky', and they believe he will survive; though does he even want to? This is part of what is swirling in my mind – does he want to carry on living in a world which has so little respect for an old man who has largely lived his life, and is now forced to try to defend it against hopeless odds?

This instance takes place in South Africa, and raises questions about the point of our being here, in america; but it also seems to bring to a head, through detailed personal anecdote, the entire global perplexity that we appear immured in, quivering like jelly-moulds of humanity-in-caraciture before the anonymity and inevitability of increasing violence of all descriptions. Although the incident is so quintessentially South African, it seems, from this perspective over here, to be a result of the spread of whatever it is that the american way of life signifies. And brings me back to grappling with why we have landed ourselves here, and what can be learned.

On the other hand, and at the same time, I'm feeling elated. This morning, sitting amongst the bales of hay, the cats on either side and the dog chewing its newfound deer leg some yards away, and the silence profoundly quiet within the whiteness of snow, I suddenly spy a fox. Tall, lithe, long, well-built, red fur with black snout, it walks through the snow about fifty yards away, completely oblivious of me and the cats and the dog and the cows and the barn and all the accoutrements of farming. Oblivious is not the right word, for the fox seems supremely aware, vibrantly sensitive. But he walked through his own domain and, though he walked through the farm, this was no farm to him, but a wilderness in which he reigned with a haughty confidence. Within seconds, the cats had whipped down into the bales of hay, and were buried out of sight; within seconds the dog had caught the scent and was off after the stranger. But was already way too late, for the fox was far too wily for the dog, even in the laying down of its scent. I sat agasp and agape, long after the fox had disappeared, for within the half minute of its walk across my line of vision it was

as if a veil had been rent, between me and it, as if I had been allowed to enter another world. From my place on the farm I had seen, as if peering over a fence, into an entirely different world, a different dimension. Two worlds co-existed, in the same place – the farm on the one hand, and the fox's domain on the other. I had been privileged to see the fox, not as part of my world, not as a thing to be used or abused, but as a world unto itself, with its own reason for being. It was not a part of something else, but a whole in its own right.

That this was a new experience for me was the surprising part; I have had far wilder experiences in southern Africa. What was the big deal, why did I feel so . . . how can I say . . . touched? I realised: because I was learning to see in new ways, learning to see whole worlds where before I had only seen reduced parts. I was learning to move into those other worlds, to move between worlds, with a respect which had a new quality, an added dimension to it.

This was what I had come here for, and somehow it was integrally tied to the questions which had arisen about violence, and which wouldn't go away. The stabbing of Karen's father, and the incident with the fox, came together in this journey into the heart of the most powerful nation on earth. In ways that I could not yet fathom, for this was all happening at the very periphery of my consciousness, where the depths of uncertainty and doubt beckoned.

In such fashion I bumped back into the village, and was struck once again, as every morning, by the blandness of the place, a blandness which seems to stretch from horizon to horizon inside my own mind and within the american psyche. Another day in paradise. I brought the truck to a halt and was inside the house before realising that I had not switched the engine off. I went outside to kill the idling motor, reflecting on how quickly we can take on the culture that surrounds us, however inadvertently. America is full of idling vehicles, sending smoke signals up to the Keepers of the Ozone Layer, giving them the finger, in a riveting reversal of prayer.

Travelling the Empire

Another day in paradise

First, travels in space

We landed in Phoenix, Arizona, to pick up a car which an old friend was lending to us for the duration of our stay. Turned out to be a white convertible, and with the top down, and sunglasses on, we felt truly anonymous, ubiquitous, and protected; rather than searching for it, we had become the american dream, and could travel incognito.

Leaving Phoenix – an immaculate desert city flawed with the heady fumes of gas from too many fatted cars, and chlorine wafting up from the flaccid-blue swimming pools – we headed north. Soon to enter, in northern Arizona, the Navajo Reservation, where the wide smoothness of the highways slows to a gravel trickle, the cars transform into rusted death traps, and the dirt poor, sideways-shunted communities eke a living from the unreclaimed desert. Suddenly we were back in reality, we were back home, we could feel again, and the feeling was both of pain and of love. But soon enough we were through the other side – you keep moving on, in america; at all costs, keep moving on – and headed into the canyon lands of Colorado, Utah, and Arizona. This is tourist country; but this country is truly stupendous, the canyons and peaks and rock formations and desert landscapes extending into a vastness way beyond anything we had ever experienced before, a place of monumental proportions. Then we were through this too, and into California, to the capital city of Sacramento, where our studies would begin.

While in Sacramento, we travelled northeast into the hills, through old gold mining towns, where we experienced the wonders of a north american fall. We travelled north through the green forests of Oregon to the wet coastal areas of Washington State. We travelled south to the hiplands of San Francisco, Palo Alto and Stanford.

Mostly, though, we stayed in Sacramento, attending the Goethean studies programme of an adult education college. We realised soon enough that while Goethean methodology was indeed what we had come for, and rightly so, nevertheless its treatment at the college was both too superficial and obfuscatingly esoteric – but more of this later. The point, though, is that within three months we had decided to leave Sacramento, a city so boring, so redneck (as they call it here), so conservative, so vacuous, so flat that it is almost concave. Every caricature which we have developed about America comes true in this city, with its bloated consumerism, its nice politeness and smiling acceptance behind which lurks . . . how else can I say this . . . violence – cold and repressed and deadly. We became convinced that the city survives on a heady mixture of Prozac, Viagra and Ritalin. The streets are dead except for the incessant cars travelling down the three-lane side streets, no-one walks, not even round the block; malls rule; and people care more about the characters on their TV screens than they do about their neighbours, or even their families. S'true's bob.

So then we left, to head for a Goethean studies programme in upstate New York on the east coast. Four thousand miles and three weeks later we were there, having travelled across the continent in the dead of winter, in our tiny convertible. This was an immaculate journey, like sailing across a vast sea in a tiny sailboat, canvas flapping in the wind. Drifting across mountain ranges, through snow and ice and high wind, from the rugged north through the wastelands of Texas to the south, where we finally felt at home again, in the crazy cosmopolitan carouse of New Orleans. Up then through the flatlands of the old slave states, then into the Appalachians, through some really wild mountain country, eventually to upstate New York, and the village of Philmont. Here we settled, studied, looked after cows, made close new connections, integrated into a mature, intelligent and alternative community of pioneers in new forms of living. Studied at The Nature Institute (but more later). From here we travelled to Boston, and to New York a couple of times, and did some country skiing. The east coast is very different from the west, more aware, intellectually astute, rigorous and consequential, less forgiving and vacuous, more forthright, interested to engage in real conversation. Still and yet, always America.

Till finally we headed back west, across middle America, which is like some surrealist's version of hell, three days of driving 13 hours a day. Past, for example, St Louis, where the fast food franchises and the motel chains and the vehicle lots stretch endlessly on and on and on until we feel as if we are driving on a treadmill, fast but pointlessly, trapped like hamsters on a wheel; past, for example, on the plains of Kansas, vast cattle farms housing hundreds of thousands of de-horned cattle squashed tight into tiny pens, the stench of which hits you long before they come into sight – does the smell of evil travel faster than the speed of light?

Finally, the plains give way to wavering landscapes lifted up into the blue, and we hit New Mexico, and there in the mountains we could relax again, and spend three days exploring native American ruins and culture and lifestyle, until finally heading back for Phoenix.

The point is, we've seen a lot of America.

Second, travels in time

We have travelled through time as well as space.

In the first instance, as we travel across America, there is the strange juxtaposition between modernity, including the history of the last few hundred years, and antiquity. Many countries have the ancient past living side by side with modernity, South Africa too. There are inevitable struggles between traditional and contemporary ways of life. What is strange about the American juxtaposition, at least for a South African, is that such struggle does not exist. The native Americans have been largely eliminated, physically; culturally, they have evaporated like the hundreds of gallons of water which transpire daily from, say, bluegum trees in their non-native South African habitat – in other words, without visibility, with our not even being aware of the phenomenon at all. For the American psyche, it's as if the native American never was, though every steakhouse bears an over-designed replica of Geronimo and his compatriots glaring down from the walls as if to ensure that the french fries are adequately slapped. And yet, and so, there is an emptiness at the heart of America, a vacuousness; like candy-floss (spun candy?) which looks inviting until it melts to

nothing in your mouth. When we search for the heart of america, we come up time and again with the realisation – there's nothing there.

In some ways the native american phenomenon is an instance of a wider reality: america has shaken off the fetters of all the old cultures out of which it was formed, and has found utter freedom from most kinds of constraint. (And it has, too, no resource constraints. It is powerfully instructive to see what america has done with this freedom, but we'll "go there later", as they would say). The native american phenomenon, however, is also unique, because this is not a culture which was moved away from, but rather one which was systematically annihilated, to the extent that even its memory has been immolated on the bonfires of progress. As we travelled through america, there seemed to be a ghost-like absence at the heart of everything, and it expresses itself as a kind of nothingness – you reach in and try to grab something of substance and your hand closes on air. This is, I think, one of the root causes of the suppressed violence which you meet everywhere – for in spite of the fact that america is so free of crime that every house we stayed in, or car we drove, ignored locks and keys entirely – in spite of this, I felt more fear in america than I have anywhere else in the world; there is a menace lurking behind the facade, and it never goes away. Few interactions are entirely authentic, is another way of putting it; and their inauthenticity arises out of this lack of heart substance – they themselves don't know where they're coming from, and deep down they're scared and angry. Bewildered by their inability to get to the heart of themselves, they discover at the centre only a void, peopled by the ghosts of those mature and wise presences who lived with some care and respect in this great land. It is an unnerving and wraith-like thing, this ever-palpable absence.

Then too, we travelled, every day and every minute, through myriad bite-size chunks of time, a myriad separate "events", each discrete, fragmented from the whole, scattered like razor-sharp glass shards glaring in the sun, so that one no longer knows quite where one is in the passage of time. There is little continuity anymore, little respect for whatever inner necessities may, from places deep within the fabric of the world, govern that passage of time. Here, now, you move on, as fast as possible, through a kaleidoscope of disparate events, time scattering like little balls of polystyrene. The very fabric of time can feel as if it is collapsing, and with it, the fabric of social process, of community, of moral imperative, of ecological integrity. Of integrity as such. Instantaneous response takes precedence over every other value. When time is so splintered, there is no longer coherence, nothing is joined; and the greatest casualty is relationship itself. And without relationship the whole dissolves, meaning evaporates, and we are left, to paraphrase Lawrence Durrell, with "the pieces of a broken wineglass".

Our third journey through time, though, has become the most harrowing. We arrived two days before "9/11", and we lived there for the following six months, as the grip of the Empire tightened. Perhaps america has always been oppressive, perhaps it has always been a police state in which the myth of freedom has been the proverbial wool pulled over the eyes, the carrot to the stick; god knows, it was many years ago, after all, that Bob Dylan penned those lines: "And the poor white man is used in the hands of them all like a tool/ he's taught in his school, from the first by the rule/ that the law is with him, to protect his white skin/ and to keep up his hate, so he never thinks straight/ 'bout the shape that he's in, but it ain't him to blame/ he's only a pawn in their game". This is not about racism, its about being a pawn, in their game, and who are they? Who are they? Are they an oligarchy, a conspiracy, simply the manifest shadow of the myth of freedom? Noam Chomsky believes the great constitution of america itself was written to protect their interests. Whoever they are, and whatever they represent, these people who themselves are represented by the faceless anonymity of George W. Bush, they are Caesar come to haunt us once more, to straddle the globe and impose their will. Lest we should ever underestimate.

America had been attacked by a hatred so implacable that no-one bothered to claim responsibility, or to explain. To the attackers, it clearly needed no explanation. To most of the horrified world, horrified though it was, it needed little explanation. But americans could not understand. So they followed their President, raised their flags and went to war. To a war which, quite obviously, can never be won by force of arms, in which the enemy is everyone who doesn't comply; a war which can end only through the most profound shift in consciousness imaginable (on all of our parts, not only american). Yet as we travelled america, during perhaps the most auspicious time the world has ever known, we were

confronted by a deafening silence. It is as if, during this time which calls for the deepest questioning imaginable, america has lost the ability to question. It has been struck dumb. Not least amongst the reasons for this must be the fact that americans now know the price of such questioning: the enemy is everyone who doesn't comply.

Dylan again: "And if my thought dreams could be seen/ they'd probably put my head in a guillotine".

One morning in Boston, we were travelling the underground with the close friend with whom we were staying, heading downtown towards her work with an NGO which defends the rights of immigrant workers. After many weeks of such deafening silence, it was good to be with a Bostonian who was politically astute, aware, and articulate. She was speaking with us about her perspective on america, on what she thought was really happening, on the newly legislated Patriot Act which permits detention without trial on suspicion of terrorism, reminding us all of apartheid days. As she spoke, her voice got lower and lower, despite the increasing rumble and roar of the underground as it rattled the tracks in its staccato tattoo. Her eyes shifted constantly amongst the passengers, watching to see who might be listening. We were stunned; wasn't this the land of the free? In fact, naive us, it took a while to comprehend that her voice was lowering out of fear. Eventually she stopped speaking entirely; the tension had become too much for her. Across the aisle sat two student types; one of them bent over and said, quietly too, and looking over his shoulder as he did so, it's okay, we're on your side. This is america, the new Empire.

A housemate with whom we stayed, a very quiet and gentle French-Canadian, was beaten, handcuffed and arrested for questioning a police officer about a minor traffic incident which the officer had caused. When we expressed outrage and pleaded with him to lay charges himself, his reply was that all the advice he had received was to remain as quiet and unobtrusive as possible, to do nothing and hope that he would get away with a minor sentence, in a situation in which it was clearly he who had been wronged, because "the atmosphere has changed here, and they will simply deport you". In another conversation we parted with a woman whose last words to us were, please pray for america, please pray for us. Many such incidents. Most powerful in the end was our own feeling upon finally leaving and spending a few days in Europe before heading home – we skipped and gamboled along the streets, as if we had been released from a delirious dream out of which we might never have awoken. The shackles were finally removed.

Perhaps we would have experienced america like this even had that September attack never happened. This would not surprise me, but rather rest my case – events have conspired to give america the opportunity which it has needed to further build the long arm of the Empire, and even turn it inward against its own people. During the time we spent in america the world feels to have changed in quite horrifying ways, which bear trying challenges for us all, even those living in the farflung provinces of the Empire.

Third, travels in my mind

What meaning do I make of all this? Of course whatever I think is conditioned by where I'm coming from. I write this in the town of Ghent, Belgium. I had been back in Cape Town three weeks when I had already to fly out on my first mission – am I an evangelist or a spy? – so here I am in Ghent. A medieval town which has retained its 'old city' in its entirety, it is a closely knit conservative community living quietly and prosperously amongst some very beautiful pastel-coloured buildings and canals and cobbled squares and castles and cathedrals. I can imagine, though, a young person wanting to break out and seek their fortune, in america, for instance, where they would be free of the constraints of community and culture; it's boring here, after all. For me, having just come from there, I bask in the detailed facades of the buildings, in the small and winding streets, in the very slow pace of the residents. So from some perspectives, what I think of america would appear ludicrous.

We did have a remarkable time there. Met some remarkable people. There are many remarkable aspects to america which have not found their way into these pages; america is quite capable of doing its own PR. But it is a lonely place, frighteningly

lonely. In the name of individuality, of freedom, of mobility, of economic . . . what . . . progress? . . . there is little community life left. America's freedom has left its people lonely and depressed, overweight and addicted to trivia. Utter freedom from tradition, utter freedom from resource constraint, and with such freedom america has imprisoned itself in a feudal world where the very many work as poorly paid labourers for the very few, whose monopolies monopolise the landscape, in endless and dreary repetition. A quest for endless variety and choice has devolved down to the tackiness of infinite franchises and chains, a monotony of architecture and town planning, and the national collective penchant for shopping. Utter freedom has also resulted in a tyranny of Empire, so that whoever is not for us is against us. By definition, debate is now regarded as unpatriotic, and patriotism is rampant over freedom. As always, one polarity, through being driven to excess, has been turned into its very opposite.

And we, out here in the provinces, tend in the same direction. The Empire is mighty, after all. Where to for us?

Hold the travelogue – what about study?

We did not choose america because we thought we'd have fun there, but because we wanted to immerse ourselves in a new way of seeing, in Goethean methodology, and in america was the only English-speaking programme we could find. On the west coast, in Sacramento. Unfortunately, the programme proved to be both vacuous and obscure, didactic and dismissive, theoretical and outrageously esoteric. Worst of all, we eventually understood that there was to be no practice; we were to be lectured at. And practice was what we had come for. Just before the winter break occurred, we heard of a Goethean scientist who ran an institute in upstate New York, Craig Holdrege of the Nature Institute. Found his email address on the Net, wrote to him, and within a couple of days had resolved to take advantage of his generosity and largesse and head across the country to work with him. He had no formal teaching programme, he said, but a couple of other people also wanted to study with him, so together we would create a programme of self-study through practice, with him as guide and mentor. This was what we had come for; we bought snow chains for our tyres and headed out across america, hearts alive once more.

We were not disappointed. To the contrary. The Nature Institute is a tiny outfit situated in a tiny village, quietly contributing to the forging of a new consciousness. Without presumption, but in fact nothing less than this. How to express Goethe's contribution succinctly, when it is so far out on the leading edge of consciousness that it needs fast horses to follow it across the ruins of the old to the lip of uncharted realms, and powerful binoculars even to begin to see the dust cloud it has left behind as it leads the way into the wide beyond?

Many books have been written; even I had written a manuscript relating Goethe's work to the social realm. I could simply provide you with some references here, and move on; or spend fifty pages trying to capture something. Of course I can do neither. So let me try to find an angle which might elicit a succinct turn of phrase.

We tend to view that which is living, the organic, with a kind of thinking and seeing which has been honed on the inanimate, the inorganic. In olden times we had a more inclusive view of the world; a sense of belonging, of inner spaces as extensive and tangible as outer spaces, a sense that the voice of god(s) spoke to us directly, of things we could understand. This was not necessarily conscious; we belonged, were fashioned by the world around us, not free to do other than what was asked of us by the stars. We remained within the bounty of the given. More recently, with the rise of materialistic, scientific thinking, we have broken free, moved beyond the given, externalised our world, put it outside of ourselves so that we could see it as discrete and separate, as something to be utilised, to be controlled and manipulated to suit our needs. In so doing we have separated ourselves, created a dualism of subject and object, and in the process, whilst perhaps losing a sense of belonging and reverence, we have gained a certain freedom, and a new form of independent consciousness. In the process, the world around us has died away into a collection of

inanimate things, and we have lost the living link which originally bound it all into one. Our world has fragmented, the better to control it piecemeal, to free ourselves of the constraints of wholeness, where everything has consequences for everything else. So we have achieved independence. And yet, our world is being torn asunder as the fragments fly apart and collide again, in increasing tension, as the results of our discrete manipulations are born in on us. We have taken freedom, but lost the plot

Goethe's contribution is really to the development of a new level of consciousness. His approach is to differentiate between organic and inorganic, between animate and inanimate; while a materialist, instrumentalist thinking is legitimate with respect to the inanimate world (and it is this thinking that we have begun to take as fundamental, it is this thinking that we impose on the world around us), it is not at all legitimate for the organic world, the world of the living. (Of course Goethe would not have used all this terminology; apart from anything else, he was a doer, not a theorist – but here we're trying to understand him). To approach, appreciate, the world of the living, we have to see the whole which lies enfolded inside the parts; the living link which is invisible to the eye which cannot imagine it.

We have to see the world not as fixed and finished but as in a process of becoming, a process of continuous metamorphosis, change and development; and we have to focus our gaze on that process itself, rather than simply on the discrete pieces which precipitate out from it, which manifest from time to time. And to do so we have to get inside that process, under the skin of the world, so to speak; we have to see ourselves as participants, not simply as observers; as implicate, not as separate. Indeed, nothing is separate from anything else. Yet at the same time he is not advocating a going back to a prior phase of consciousness, not at all; it is to take previous phases, which we have set against each other, and combine them into a new form of consciousness. So that we can be both outside and inside, both participant and observer, both able to appreciate and able to guide out of an appreciative freedom, at the same time. A consciousness which we could say today implies a collaboration with the divine, an elevation towards co-creation.

At the centre of a Goethean approach is then to engage in what William Blake referred to as "two-fold vision". To see all organic, living phenomena using two modes of cognition simultaneously. On the one hand, accurate observation of, and rapt attention to the parts, to the details of what is there, to the material of the phenomenon; so that one is not seduced by conjecture. On the other hand, an imaginative seeing into the phenomenon, a linking of the parts into one whole, attention to the relationships between the parts, to the patterns which hold the parts together. In this way contradictory modes are embraced as a way of lifting meaning from the phenomenon. Other contradictions too – seeing the phenomenon as finished and static, and seeing it as in movement, becoming. Being both observer, with the phenomenon outside of one, and participant, recognizing that without you to see, there is nothing to see. Accepting the phenomenon for what is is, and reading meaning into it.

Overlaying these two opposing modes of cognition onto each other, one begins to see and appreciate in an entirely new way. So that the idea which manifests as the material phenomenon begins to emerge, and one sees into the archetypal, invisible, intangible depths which form the world. This is not the equivalent of theorising, or generalising; if one accurately engages in two-fold seeing, the third which arises as meaning, arises as a direct perception. One actually sees it. As Wittgenstein said: ". . . there is a kind of seeing which is also a kind of thinking . . . : the seeing of connections". Goethe referred to this as a "delicate empiricism". It is not an ordinary place to be; Henry Thoreau noted that: "Wisdom does not inspect, but behold; we must look a long time before we can see". What I am trying to convey here has nothing whatever to do with a New Age fantasy; I'm talking of the gradual honing of a disciplined, rigorous practice.

The development of this kind of thinking corresponds to what may be called organic, or formative thinking, as opposed to mechanistic and instrumentalist thinking. A thinking which is alive and mobile, able to follow the process of becoming itself, as it passes through metamorphosis and change; a thinking which is able to pick up the intent that lies behind the manifest phenomenon, the patterns or threads or energies which hold it together. We cannot see what we cannot imagine, yet what we see is not an imagination; we cannot accept what we do not see. This is a phenomenology, which avoids theorising and

comes back to the phenomenon time and again, yet sees through to the whole which informs the disparate pieces.

This is all so complex, so far beyond current consciousness or practice, that few appreciate thinkers like Goethe or Wittgenstein. Yet Craig manages to render the complex accessible without becoming simplistic, and without reducing. He is a person who always holds the questions and never comes to conclusions, yet who is never vague but always precise, clear and focused. Through painstaking discipline he has, I think genuinely, turned his 'thinking into a kind of seeing', into an organ of perception. Under his guidance we all took further strides along that road.

There were four of us. We worked together about three times a week, both studying texts as well as engaging in actual observation exercises and discussion. In between, we worked on our own. This was truly a learning, rather than a teaching, environment; Craig guided and facilitated but did not impose, and never retreated into anything resembling a didactic mode. In this way we were truly encouraged to practise, to throw ourselves into the discipline itself, and to recognise that our own questions and doubts and exercising of new faculties were the key to our growing awareness and increasing insight, rather than anything which could be given us from the outside.

And gradually, sometimes painfully and frustratingly – because this practice goes so far beyond what we have achieved with consciousness so far, goes so much against the grain of the habits we have been taught and have incurred – gradually we began to move, picked up momentum, and finally, in those three months, reached a place where the practice is clear enough for us all to further the discipline on our own. There is no end point, (and in any case we are merely at the beginning); there is only the prospect of an endlessly daunting and exciting adventure into new realms of consciousness. The feeling is comparable only to leaving the house to go to a lovers' tryst; or to packing with one's compatriots for the expedition to find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. There is a racing of the heart, a trembling anticipation, and the knowledge that one is leaving the narrow and the known.

...nu?

(a Yiddish expression implying: So? What are you saying? Where are you going with all this? Why did you bring us here in the first place? Get to the point already. You go on and on just like Uncle Mottel. I remember, in fact, when Uncle Mottel, may he rest in peace, wanted to explain about the...)

Kind of unintentionally, drawn almost in spite of ourselves, we arrived, when in New York, at the devastated site of the World Trade Centre. They have now built a walkway and platform from which to view the area, you have to go to some place some blocks away to get tickets, I never worked out whether you pay for the tickets or whether this set-up is just to control the crowds; there is this incredibly resilient and ineluctable naivete with which they turn everything into entertainment – that, and the eternal quest for money. We couldn't face any of this, so we never got to the platform, and from everywhere else, from the streets all around, the site is now closed to viewing. Still, we stood around for awhile with a disconsolate and motley crew on the sidewalk, police keeping us non-ticketholders at bay. Couldn't see much - a fleeting glimpse of a truck still carting debris away after five months, and a half-view of a smallish mound of rubble. Perhaps because of this paucity of stimulation – not much of a story here to take home to the kids – my eyes were drawn, slightly bored and indifferent, to the buildings surrounding the site. I stared without seeing, without thinking, and suddenly, as though I had fallen into or out of a dream, I was able to see through the parts, perhaps, and into some glimmering of the whole. I suddenly saw the site differently; there was another world out there.

I had been looking for something which would impress itself on me, and I saw that I had been looking the wrong way. My eyes were now drawn to the negative space between the still-standing buildings, and the full weight of the horror was suddenly born in on me. It was not 'something' that was relevant here, that I needed to be looking for, but the immensity of the nothingness which had taken its place. There was nothing there! At the heart of everything there was, simply, nothing, a void; but a nothingness, a void, which filled the empty space with a huge and overpowering bearing-down. If nothing had ever been there, it would have been different; but this was something other. It was the overwhelming presence of an absence which struck me with such force. The presence of an absence. The thought hurtled past my mind like wind whistling up out of the darkness of a fathomless chasm, leaving me fighting for breath, as if the very air around us was being sucked away. There is a hole in the heart of everything; at the centre of of the newest and most powerful movement of consciousness we have yet been able to attain, there is an absence which is a new presence in the world, a kind of shadow world, a black hole, a yawning doom. Brought about at the confluence of tradition and freedom, religion and emancipation. Born of these irreconcilable fundamentalisms. An eerie, malevolent nothingness, making mockery of the human project, standing as sentinel and statue over the manifold atrocities which have been increasingly perpetrated in living memory. Making it increasingly difficult to go on, with any sense of honour or hope.

Which is why, now more than ever, everything we do, or refrain from doing, has such relevance, such profound bearing.

I stumbled away from that site without wanting to acknowledge what I had seen, pushing it aside, trying at all costs to deny its validity. Slowly, though, over time, what I saw has settled within me.

The time is at hand. It is time to bring conflicting and irreconcilable things and ways and approaches together, so that we may find our ways through the ruins of our pride, and unblock the path once more. The time is always at hand, yes, but what is possible now, for good and for bad, has never been possible before.

The spectres and wraith-like absences gather. It is not terrorism that is the enemy. It is the concept of enemy that undermines us.

In all spheres, most of all deep inside our very way of thinking, we have somehow to begin the monumental task of bringing opposites together. I come back, as so often, to Lindsay Clarke's passionate: "If we (are) to find a key to the explosive condition of the world it (can) only be done by holding opposites together . . . (This happens) when you refuse to shrug them off, neither disowning your own violence nor deploying it; not admitting only the good and throwing evil in the teeth of the opposition, but holding the conflict together inside yourself as yours – the dark and the light of it, the love and the lovelessness, the terror and the hope".

I am beginning to understand. I have seen the spectres, and they do begin to walk. "So let us not talk falsely now/ for the hour is getting late" (Dylan). (Yes, again)

...

Back in Cape Town, on our return, the ringing of the phone drags me out of the shower. Wet and shivering in the shifting autumn weather, I run to answer it. A friend is phoning to welcome us back, phoning from his cellphone as he drives to work. Pleased as I am to hear his voice, I realise I'm also irritated by the strain it takes to hear him through the static of the connection, as he breaks away and returns again and again. I have never liked cellphones. I learned recently that migratory birds have begun to lose their way, increasingly confused as the number of cellphones worldwide increases; the fabric of the world – which I'm sworn to protect – is under threat, my patience is wearing thin, I'm shivering and the shower is still running, and he's talking away relaxed in the comfort of his car, glad to have something to while away the time with in the rush hour traffic. Suddenly he gets another call, trying to break through. 'Call waiting', they call it – how would we stay connected without the latest piece of equipment?. Hang on, he says, I just need to check who's calling, I'll be back with you in a mo'. And I'm thinking, as I stare at the drops dripping disconsolately to the floor, what the fuck, who called who anyway, I feel violated, what am I colluding with here? I longed for so very long to be back at home, and now I find I've brought america with me. Or found it waiting on my return, having seduced my people during my absence. So where to

now? Can anyone out there reading this even understand what I'm saying here, or am I just some creaking Victorian moralist?

I'm talking about different forms of violence. I'm talking about loneliness, the breakdown of community. I'm talking about the evaporation of common culture and understanding. I'm talking about a freedom which has lost all sense of responsibility. I'm talking about ecological and social disintegration. I'm talking about double standards. I'm talking about globalisation, which is really another name for the new colonialism masking the forces of Empire. I'm talking about severe fragmentation.

That evening Jesse, my daughter, who obtained her driver's license while we were gone, asks if she can take the car to go out. Of course, I say; but inside I'm thinking – I've never been here before, Jesse going out into that big bad night at the wheel of a car. With the boys it was different, I never thought twice about their taking the car, but this finds me a bit nervy. It seems to show on my face. Don't worry, she says, I'll be fine; anyway I have my cellphone, just in case. I cannot tell you how relieved I feel – she has her cellphone, just in case, she can make contact should she need to. Its only after she's left the house that I think – hang on, when did you get a cellphone, isn't this supposed to irritate me? What about the birds? Which way up is down, anyway?

...

Throughout this piece I have typed the word 'america' in lower case. Because I do not think of america as a country so much as a culture (or as an absence of a culture). america belongs to us all; it has infiltrated our consciousness, our cultures, throughout the world. It is where we have come to, a place of individual freedom which we have not been sufficiently wise to handle, and so it lapses into triviality, excess, lacking all conviction and full of irrelevant intensity. A place where everything fragments, scatters into pieces, wanders off into its own corner, while the very astute make a quick buck on the side. (Not so quick actually, and not at all on the side; turns out all that is left to hold us together is bucks). But there are no coincidences, and the move into this atomistic realm is not chance; we are here because this was always the next place to come to, it is just that we are testing its limits beyond the bounds of endurance.

On the other hand, though, there is a desperate yearning to draw back from the abyss, to return to those ancient and respected and wise ways of being which sustained us for so long; somewhere in there is Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, even Buddhism when it turns religious. Not to mention the nationalisms and blood bonds. Not to mention those seekers who try to resurrect hearsay versions of, for instance, native american culture, or Australian aboriginal. Or those who try to cobble various elements of these together into a patchwork quilt which may provide some warmth and a feeling of security as the cold of a starless night gathers about us.

There is no question but that we live in an increasingly fragmenting world. The whole, the given, has been lost. Yet through the very losing are new ways to find. We have never been here before. A place which is so close to the abyss, yet, if we can bring together the streams which, opposing each other, have brought us here, we might fashion the key which could enable us to co-create a future.

So.

I know that the incident of the attack on Karen's father – still remember that bit? – is very South African, currently. But it is more than simply local. Gratuitous violence is met all over the globe, as is inhuman poverty, ostentatious wealth, cultural clashes, the untimely deaths of waterways and the lonely fates of bewildered birds and shell-shocked refugees. I think that Steiner is right, in that perspective attributed to him in an opening quote to this piece. We are on the cusp of a new way of thinking and being and seeing, one which is mobile and flexible and creative and penetrating enough to engage with living forces themselves, so that we can begin to co-create.

And the possibilities for developing this new way are being denied us, because division, in every sphere, is defended unto the death. Yet every entity that lives is of such utter magnificence that respect would be the very least that we would feel, if we could but see this. See the wondrous worlds, the worlds within worlds, that are to be found when, as happened to me with the fox, we manage to bring two ways together and slip through the veil which separates us from the sources of our being.

For me, this sabbatical has provided one means of trying to do so; though there is nothing instant here, only a practice requiring such rigorous attention that stumbling, falling, even failure is inevitable. But, to leave you with a quote from Rilke (who writes, as they would put it in Belgium, "Like an angel pissing on your tongue"):

"If only we would let ourselves be dominated
as things do by some immense storm,
we would become strong too, and not need names.

This is how (we grow); by being defeated, decisively,
by constantly greater beings."