

## **This Changes Everything**

In the Book of Genesis, chapter 25, we read about the birth of Esau and Jacob, the twin sons of the Hebrew patriarch, Isaac, and his wife Rebekah. It's a familiar story – although it may not be familiar for much longer since we seem to have relegated the Bible to the book pile marked 'quaint and sometimes offensive spiritual literature' – but its familiarity has masked its meaning somewhat. Esau is born first and, rather bizarrely, he has a full head of red hair. Jacob comes out second, grasping the heel of his brother.

As one continues to read the story in Genesis, one comes across the old familiar theme of fairy tales: the younger brother, the one without the birth-right, is the one who succeeds; the older brother, for all his obvious advantages, never achieves his potential. So far, so conventional. But there's another dimension to the story which we miss when reading it in translation: the names of the two boys are significant. 'Esau' is related to a Hebrew word meaning 'made', and the Jewish sages say that this indicates that Esau was born 'ready-made', 'fully-formed', hence the crop of red hair when he emerges from the womb. The sages also conjecture that he had the face of a fully-grown adult. The name Jacob, on the other hand, comes from the Hebrew word for 'heel', no doubt because he was grasping his brother's heel when he was born, but also indicating his incompleteness. The heel is an insignificant part of the body, down there at the bottom, and it's a long way up to the top.

This indicates the crucial differences between the two boys. Esau was fully-formed and had no learning to do – at least he didn't think he had, and this was his weakness. Jacob, the second son, the insignificant one, had a lot to learn, and a lot he *did* learn because he was conscious of his own ignorance and prepared to take steps to overcome it.

I recently came across an example of a person who became acutely conscious of her own ignorance and, as a consequence, was willing to question everything she thought she knew about the world. Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer, who died in 2005, was a professor of clinical psychology at the University of California at Berkeley. In December of 1991 her nine-year old daughter's treasured harp was stolen after a concert. Since the harp was valuable, and also the only harp her daughter wanted to play, Elizabeth tried every possible way to recover it, including involving the police, but to no avail. Then a friend told her that if she really wanted to get the harp back she should try a dowser. 'The only thing I knew about dowsers,' wrote Elizabeth, 'was that they were that strange breed who locate underground water with forked sticks.' For someone in Elizabeth's intellectual world this was foreign territory indeed.

However, in desperation, she eventually took her friend's advice and telephoned a prominent dowser called Harold McCoy who lived in Arkansas and explained her problem.

‘Give me a second,’ said Harold, ‘and I’ll tell you if it’s still in Oakland.’ ‘Yes, it is,’ he said. ‘Send me a street map and I’ll locate it for you’. Elizabeth sent the map and the dowser indicated the exact house where, he said, the harp could be found. Of course, Elizabeth couldn’t just knock on the door and tell the occupants of the house that a dowser called Harold had told her they had her daughter’s harp. Nor would the police be prepared to act on such information. So Elizabeth printed some flyers promising a reward to anyone who could help her find a missing harp and she posted them in a two-block radius around the house.

Three days later she received a phone call from a man telling her that he had seen the flyer and that his neighbour had the harp. A meeting was arranged and the harp was returned. As she was driving back with the harp in the back of her car, Elizabeth said to herself, ‘This changes everything’. What she meant was that if it was possible for a man in Arkansas to locate a stolen object in California with only a street map and a dowsing rod, then the world was not the place that her education and her culture had told her that it was. If it is possible to know something without recourse to the normal sensory channels of knowing, then the materialist paradigm of reality she had been fed from her infancy, and which had informed her clinical practice and her academic study was not adequate. This experience with the harp had changed everything, and Elizabeth had some re-thinking to do.

In her book *Extraordinary Knowing*, which was published just after her death in 2005, Elizabeth writes:

The harp changed how I work as a clinician and psychoanalyst. It changed the nature of the research I pursued. It changed my sense of what’s ordinary and what’s extraordinary. Most of all, it changed my relatively established, relatively contented, relatively secure sense of how the world adds up. If Harold McCoy did what he appears to have done, I had to face the fact that my notions of space, time, reality, and the nature of the human mind were stunningly inadequate. Disturbing as that recognition was, there was something intriguing, even exciting, about it as well.

Perhaps it was because Elizabeth was at the top of her career ladder that she didn’t have to dismiss the incident, or explain it away as coincidence or good luck, or keep it secret so that her colleagues wouldn’t think her crazy. Maybe it was because she was honest and brave that she was prepared to put her reputation on the line and go public with her investigations. She caused some consternation among her academic peers, as you can imagine, but in the workshops and lectures she organised she enabled many of them to speak about their own strange experiences, sometimes publicly for the first time. It tells us a great deal about the kind of repressive intellectual culture in which we live that

people are frightened to talk about such things for fear that their academic reputation might be compromised. (The internet has a number of attempts to dismiss Elizabeth's experience – to question both her sanity and her integrity. One sceptic, another latter-day Esau, suggested that it was all bogus because if Harold McCoy had such powers he would be fabulously rich and he wouldn't be living in a trailer park in Arkansas. Which says more about the mind-set of the sceptic than it does about Elizabeth or Harold.)

In her book she describes an encounter with a world-famous neurosurgeon who was on the staff of a big university hospital but who had stopped teaching because he felt he couldn't really teach 'what he's really doing'. He went on to explain why it is that his patients don't seem to die on him.

As soon as he learns that someone needs surgery ... .. he sits at the patient's head, sometimes for thirty seconds, sometimes for hours at a stretch. He waits – for something he couldn't possibly admit to surgery residents, much less teach. He waits for a distinctive white light to appear round his patient's head. Until it appears, he knows it is not safe to operate. Once it appears, he knows it can go ahead and the patient will survive.

Chapter two of her book contains numerous examples of highly qualified academics recounting their own anomalous experiences of coming to *know* things in extraordinary ways, such as precognitive dreams and telepathy.

White light? Mumbo jumbo! Dowzers? Woo woo nonsense! Telepathy? Just a figment of the imagination! That's the response of the opinion formers in our culture, the heads of university departments, television and radio pundits, influential newspaper columnists, even some religious figures. It takes real guts to stand by one's own experience against such a formidable array of opponents, particularly when one's career advancement is at stake.

I have had a number of weird experiences, particularly around coincidences (which I certainly don't try to explain away with statistics) but I've also had a precognitive episode and I've encountered a poltergeist.

The precognitive incident occurred when I was nine years old and was over a trivial matter, but it left a profound impression. I was a pupil at a Catholic school, and during Lent we organised numerous activities to raise money for the diocesan orphanage. One of these was a weekly raffle for a bar of chocolate – a big bar, I must admit, but certainly not as big as the bars that children will nowadays receive and consume almost routinely, but this was just after sweet rationing had ended and chocolate was still something of a luxury. All the tickets were put into a biscuit tin and the headmaster was to draw out the winning ticket. Before he put his hand in the tin I *knew* I would be the winner. It

was a certainty such as I had never experienced before and have never experienced since.

I met the poltergeist when I was baby-sitting in my brother's house forty-five years ago. I won't go into details, but it concerned a bedroom door opening and closing of its own accord and the feeling that I was being played with by some kind of mischievous non-material agency.

Morag, too, has had interesting anomalous experiences. For example, on the night we met – 9<sup>th</sup> September 1974 - we were in each other's company for five minutes and spoke only a few sentences to each other, but later, when Morag went to do her shift at the hospital, she was to tell a colleague, 'I've just met the man I'm going to marry'.

Now, I know the ways in which the Esaus of this world would explain such things: selective memory, pure chance, wishful thinking. And you know them, too, so there's no need to rehearse them here. But the cumulative effect of numerous such small experiences has led me to the realisation, nay, to the conviction, that the view of the world which pervades our intellectual culture, which would have us believe that the universe is the accidental outcome of purely material forces, that there is no purpose or design in Nature, that our lives are ultimately meaningless, that the human mind is simply an epiphenomenon of the brain, is just plain wrong.

And what's more disturbing, this is the view that has taken hold of Unitarianism. Everywhere its influence is felt, sometimes overtly so, where worship contains nothing that can be construed as prayer, where sermons and congregational activities concern politics and social affairs, (what the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh called 'sanctified sociology'), where investigation of anomalous phenomena rarely takes place, where there's no mention of life after death (unless accompanied by an apology or a disclaimer), and where we take for granted that the big questions of existence have been solved for us by Copernicus, Darwin, and Richard Dawkins.

And then we wonder why it is that nobody wants to join us. Where is our spirit of intellectual adventure? Where is our willingness to 'venture boldly and explore'? Where is our readiness to trust our instincts, to realise that those strange things that occur in the lives of all of us cannot just be dismissed by clever rationalisations, and that there *are* extraordinary ways of knowing which really do change everything? The great Roman orator and writer Cicero thought that the word 'religion' was not derived from the Latin verb *religare*, 'to bind' as St. Augustine and others of the ancients thought, and as we still think today, but from *re-legere*, 'to read again', 'to go through again'. Religion should involve looking again at the world and being prepared to read it with fresh, unprejudiced eyes, to re-examine what Elizabeth Mayer calls 'the relatively established, relatively contented, relatively secure sense of how the world adds up'? When was the last time you were prepared to reappraise your experience? When was the last time you changed your mind?

We have a lot to learn. We are not 'fully formed' like Esau; like Jacob, we're at the beginning of experience, grasping at the heel of life, and we have a long way to go before we get up to the head.

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