

# Rabbit on the Cliff-top

*Being and Identity: Musings on a cliff in Dorset 1997*

I sat on a hill and watched a small rabbit. It lolloped along, grazing, as rabbits do, sniffing and pricking its ears, alert for danger, but not too alert, for it wasn't expecting trouble. It was at one with its world.

Six inches the other side of it was a sheer drop down a golden cliff to where the sea pounded the rocks far below. The rabbit was unconcerned. Its burrow was just over the edge of the cliff as it happened, and this was its daily feeding-ground. It was unaware of the peril of a hop-too-far, unaware of distance and height, unaware of the nature of the vast shining expanse beyond, unaware of the not infrequent tendency of the crumbling cliffs to sweep grass, burrow and beasts to a tumultuous end.

I, on the other hand, was aware of all these things as I surveyed the rabbit and the rabbit's world. My world, even in the simplicity of these surroundings, was far more complex, had a far greater frame of reference, included past and future, assessed potential danger, and knew the relationship of sky, sea and land as part of a greater picture.

Clearly, I was a far superior being. My world-view absolutely blew the rabbit's out of the water! To say nothing of the fact that I could read Shakespeare, write essays, use a computer, travel across the earth in a plane, and lived in a sophisticated warren of bricks, glass and electrical wiring.

As I gloated over my superior status as a being, a little seed of doubt entered my mind. In what way, exactly, was I a superior being?

## Components of Being

The rabbit's world-view arose from its senses. So did mine, and we shared the same senses. The only difference appeared to be the variety and complexity of *what* we could see, hear, smell, touch and taste, and what we made of them.

However, I can *think*, and am motivated by *emotions*. Does, the rabbit share these? Certainly other animals do. Dogs, for instance, are well able to think things out, and appear to be aware of and share in emotion. So do the higher apes, and they have even demonstrated an ability to use tools. Therefore, they must be able, even rudimentarily, to abstract.

Now I had always reckoned that the ability to abstract was the crown of human intellectual achievement, and that which marked us out from the rest of the animal kingdom. After all, our ability to abstract has created writing and literacy, and from it the whole edifice of human civilization.

By contrast, animals can only, of themselves, live in holes, caves, trees and avail themselves of natural shelters within the environment, whereas we build elaborate structures around ourselves. We use tools and abstract principles of design, and compute materials and forces to suit our requirements on a scale ranging from igloos and grass-huts, to skyscrapers and the Houses of Parliament.

But it was occurring to me that even if abstraction is the crown of intellect, human command of it might be merely a matter of development and scope, rather than a feature of a different order. All living creatures seem to utilize an appropriate degree of intellect, emotion/feelings, and senses. We have developed intellect to a high degree, but many animals have developed the senses to a higher degree than have we. In the end, we all share the same basic weaponry!

The real nub, the essentially sobering question is: - although my powers have enabled me to create and inhabit a more complex environment, am I in *fact living any differently from the rabbit?*

I may have a nice house, a car, family, job etc., but I am identified with my world just as the rabbit is with his. The reality is that everything I do, no matter how sophisticated, is simply 'rabbit-on-the-cliff'. I am really no more than a bigger rabbit on a different cliff.

This was depressing! Feeling 'at one' with the rabbit was not as I expected. It was vital to search for a significant difference between us.

### **Identity—the Break-out**

Can the rabbit *break out* of his world?

Is he ever likely to look up with a mouthful of grass and gaze out to where a shaft of sunlight lies over the sea, and feel immortal longings stir in his breast?

No, he is not; - not if he remains rabbit.

But I can.

I can look up with a mouth full of spaghetti Bolognese, see the evening sunlight lying across my lawn, and be transported with intangible longing. Unfortunately transports do not aid digestion, so I fork up some salad and chastise the child picking mushrooms from the sauce with his fingers. Effectively, I am equally trapped within my human world: just a Big Bunny on a cosy Cliff.

However, perhaps the immortal longings felt by me and to which the bunny is quite oblivious, (on all the evidence) mark a real difference between us. Those emotions are pointers to a door, a door of which maybe 80 % of the human race are aware to some degree, but never seek seriously to find. Perhaps only 3 % actually go through. I reckoned myself part of the missing 17% - aware of, and making efforts, but very much this side of the cosmic Door.

I'm still totally identified with the human world, with all its aches and pains, frustrations, ambitions, irritations and bound by my senses, emotions and intellect. For me to fundamentally alter my view of the world would seem a leap right off the cliff. For the rabbit to escape his world-view, he too would have to make an unprecedented leap; a transformation, truly become Not-Bunny, as we know it.

(It is not a mere change of environment. My fat, flop-eared version has traded fields and burrow for a wooden two-roomed house, drinks from a glass bottle, and eats from a bowl with RABBIT written on it. But he is simply bunny in borrowed surroundings. I've proved this, because he *can't read* what's on his bowl!)

## **Sacrifice**

I decided that a key which might open the door, could be *human sacrifice*. If sense, emotion and intellect keep my world in place, if there were to be a radical change in these, would I still be human, as I know it?

Surely - I argued to the butterflies flitting among the grass - I do not wish to be an *alien*? But perhaps it is an honour, an achievement to out-reach a merely human outlook, and become a citizen of a greater world? If I define those glimpsed possibilities, and the testimony of those few down the ages who have made a great leap as achieving 'full' human potential, I am forced to classify the 97 per cent of the rest of us as somehow "failed" humans. It would seem better to award most of mankind the dignity of being truly human, and acknowledge that some few reach beyond into a sphere not conditioned entirely by the limitations of our triple apparatus of sense, emotion and intellect.

Could I voluntarily jump off this metaphorical cliff, or open the cliff-door? It rather goes against the grain, since all nature is geared to preserving itself and protecting its familiar identity. It is far more attractive to believe that our overall goal is to *develop and extend* intellect, emotions and senses, not to relinquish their hegemony. But developing, increasing, extending could mean a bigger human self, not altogether useful if it is true that "strait is the gate, and narrow is the way that leads to eternal life". A 'dimensionally-challenged' self could be doomed at the door.

## **Finding the Door**

In search of the key, I examined my behaviour for the last 20 years and concluded that I had engaged in a fair bit of enlargement, but I had also done something else. I had regularly and systematically closed down my senses, ignored the swirling emotions, and reined in my intellect. I had done this for concentrated periods of practice once or twice a day for years and years, and practised detaching from the self-enhancing products of sensory, emotional and intellectual activities in my daily actions.

I contemplated the implications of this behaviour, and sized myself up against the glimmering Door. Was I thin enough yet to slip past the door-keeper of another world?

By this time, I had a numb bum. The rabbit had gone. I hastened to summarize my findings to myself before the charm departed and the grinders ceased.

## **A Space apart**

Rabbit and I are, both of us, identified with our surroundings and inseparable from our worlds. But the one thing which distinguishes my capabilities from Rabbit et al., is the *ability to set something apart from the surroundings*. When I acknowledge that there is somewhat beyond, I am detaching, stepping back from identification, and moreover, I can create an actual space in my world to do this in.

A temple is space enclosed. Humans make them; rabbits don't, and nor do any of the higher mammals. An enclosed space need not be evident or concrete on the macro-scale. When my senses, emotions and intellect stand back, there is space in my psyche, and a great deal of space, too, for normally these activities totally occupy it. I can hold that space in being, and dwell within it. My furry friend cannot do likewise. The earth is his entire world, whereas a sacred space is a very conscious creation, set apart from any world a being naturally inhabits.

Every intimation of immortality stirred by the beauty of light and shadow is like a sentinel sounding the alert: 'Wake up, sleepy one; there's a world beyond the frame.' Why am I often so reluctant to enter the Temple, the one to which I can have access? I argue that if beautiful surroundings can awaken a sense of the sacred, should I not love these beauties more, not turn from them? Surely I should attempt to embrace, to merge,.....just like the rabbit.

And so my deliberations had come full circle. Emerson said: "the primary wisdom is Intuition; all later teachings are tuitions". I have been heavily, and very successfully, tutored into the limitations of human being, and I have to be reminded that it is possible to break-out and transcend them. To do so is essentially Human.

The sentinel stirred with the sea-wind and the shimmering path over the sea, reminding, always reminding but never revealing.

The dark, silent space of the temple beckoned, and in that space all aliens foregather, together and alone, in the presence of Beauty without limit.

Call it gap in the fabric of the human world... a doorway... a cliff... who knows?

The rabbit doesn't, and neither do I in my rabbit-mode, rubbing my bum and hurrying back to base. Run, Rabbit, run, rabbit run, run, run.....

Lucy Oliver

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