**Twyford Down**

I live in Southampton, and the ancient cathedral city of Winchester lies about eight miles to the North – capital of England in King Alfred’s day as legend has it. Between these two cities run the great sweep of undulating chalk downland that graces the South of Britain. St.Catherine’s hill in Winchester is justly famous as a sacred site, crowned by its graceful grove of trees. Next to it lies deep Plague Pit Valley, where the bodies of the plague victims of Winchester were flung in those dark times. Next to that there was once Twyford Down. Now there is a huge, hideous and obscene scar in the chalk, through which cars and lorries constantly thunder, projecting their noise and fumes, as the road has a particularly steep incline, throughout the city of Winchester.

It was a long time coming, this abomination. It is a devious tale, full of betrayal and corruption, and the careful preservation of a bottleneck in the road between Southampton and London at Winchester to help force through this unacceptable solution. Well attended rallies were held against the proposal, backed by the great and the good and the environmental lobby groups. It was going to be alright. Then an unexpected electoral outcome meant that the party wanting the road were returned to power. The unthinkable became inevitable. The opposition accepted reality and melted. Except…

A small band of direct action protesters had set up camp on the proposed site of the road to prevent construction. This remarkable group called themselves the Dongas Tribe after the deep gullies between the downs, made by the passage of people and flocks through the ages at the great crossing point of routes that was Winchester. They, along with many committed allies from the respectable citizens of Winchester and Southampton, opened my heart, my capacity to relate, so that this landscape became as precious; more precious even, than human life. For me, this has been an infinitely enriching experience. In embracing the earth in this very particular way I am expanded and at the same time merged. For me, my family, and our Creation Spirituality/ GreenSpirit group, joining with the Dongas to protest at the outrage has also been a life changing experience.

The camp on Twyford Down was a welcoming place in the autumn of 1992. The benders and tipis that were home to the group blended into the land. The kettle boiled on the fire. The campers sang chants, made banners and mended the pantomime dragon that was such an effective part of their regular disruption of the construction (destruction) work – difficult to arrest, a pantomime dragon! Music, theatre and humour were part of the spirit and the method of the protest. Our group contributed by leading dances with live music at one of the big rallies, and composing the ‘Twyford Litany’.

But this was not a jolly outing. The Dongas were woken at dawn and brutally thrown off the land by the ‘yellow men’ (from their visibility clothing) of the security company. Once the road building was underway in earnest, there was razor wire, there were arc lights, and I once witnessed 200 policemen marching down a hillside to eject protesters sitting on a temporary bridge, to prevent it being put across the road, as part of the construction plan. Protesters with resources were targeted with punitive injunctions, through information gleaned by a (gloriously dimwitted) private detective agency.

Personally, my heart was opened to previously unplumbed depths of pain, sorrow and rage. I always knew that if anything happened to either of my sons or my husband, I would be devastated. I had not realised I could feel the same way about the rape of a landscape. My commitment to an environmentally sensitive lifestyle, at least in terms of transport, has measurably deepened. My new job of three years is eight miles from home. I cycle there, using the bus (with my folding bike) for part of the way back. This might not save the planet, but apart from being a life and health enhancing choice for me, it is visible, so does make people think.

The protest failed to stop the road. The road building programme itself continued, but the tide of public revulsion that essentially started with Twyford did eventually bring it to a halt. Where the reasoned argument of the major environmental movements and the political process had failed, the power of the Relational/ the transliminal, had been harnessed. Hearts had been opened and lives changed. This was in the true sense a spiritual experience.

To conclude this with the second part of a poem by Andrew Jordan, the poet who has captured the movement in his powerful book of poems: ‘The Mute Bride.’ Many of these poems echo the themes I have identified of a cosmic desecration – it was hard to choose which one to include.

**M3**

*The scar in the hillside*

*is permanent now. Surreal*

*it casts the quality of dream*

*a trauma of memories,*

*over the valley. The chalk*

*white face of a child*

*newly abused. Vaginal*

*entrance to the underworld*

*where Orpheus commits*

*his accidental act*

*of betrayal (over and over)*

*His fate acting out in him*

*inadvertently. Damsel flies*

*the black gloss of their wings,*

*swarm. Even in a dream*

*it seems impossible to turn*

*these symbols into anything*

*really powerful. Regrets,*

*the dark feminine water,*

*cannot be reconciled.*

*Andrew Jordan.‘The Mute Bride’. P. 78-79.*

To knit this digression into the general argument: I am claiming that the experience of Twyford Down represented an opening to the transliminal; to mystery. The sense of abomination and revulsion around what was done felt like sacrilege. The desecration of something holy. This sense of desecration was shared by all involved, including people from a variety of religions and no religion. I am further claiming that, on a personal level, the experience was transformative – not just in terms of life choices but in terms of an expansion and opening of the self. The folding bike is merely a visible result of this inner event. How do I know? I feel it. Not very scientific! Now I will try and link this feeling with what I have learnt about the self from ICS.

Clarke, I. ( 2008) *Madness, Mystery and the Survival of God*. Winchester:'O'Books.

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