

# CLOUDS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Sermon/service by Jaco B. ten Hove, co-minister, Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD

February 24, 2008

*An unanswered question is a fine traveling companion. It sharpens your eye for the road.*

—Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, 1997

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## **HYMN** #1059:

Words by Jim Scott

*May Your Life Be As A Song*, resounding with the dawn to sing awake the light.  
And softly serenade the stars, ever dancing circles in the night.

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## **CHOIR ANTHEM**

*One Voice*

Words by Jane Griner

Joining one voice to another voice, to another, we sing melodies that float above the din, and  
linger, never still; to echo back in memory.

Joining one voice to another voice, to another, we weave richest harmony, brushing by ancient  
runes, invoking perfect peace, resonant ever changing beauty.

Joining one voice to another voice, to another, together as chorus, now as one, though parting,  
in unison, in song,

We join one voice to another voice, to another, to another, to another, to another.

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## **READING:** From “We Are All Savants”

by Diane Powell

In *Shift: At the Frontiers of Consciousness*, Journal of the Inst. of Noetic Sciences, #9, 12/05-2/06

(Online at [http://www.noetic.org/publications/shift/issue9/S09\\_WeAreAllSavants\\_Powell.pdf](http://www.noetic.org/publications/shift/issue9/S09_WeAreAllSavants_Powell.pdf))

Boxed portions not presented live; included here for fuller context.

- Daniel Tammet, a 26-year-old autistic savant, can speak seven languages, recall the [mathematical] constant pi to [more than 22,000] decimal places, and figure out cube roots as fast as a calculator.
- Kim Peek, the man on whom the movie *Rain Man* was based, can read two books simultaneously—one with each eye—and recite in detail the 7,600 books he has read.

- Leslie Lemke is a blind savant who played Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto no. 1 after he heard it the first time. Like most musical savants, he never had a piano lesson.
- Stephen Wiltshire is an artistic savant who drew a highly accurate map of the London skyline from memory after a single helicopter trip.
- The twins in Oliver Sacks's book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* amused themselves by calling out six-digit prime numbers that just appeared in their minds; they also had calendar-calculating skills that spanned over 8,000 years.

...Savants demonstrate remarkable abilities that are not understood by conventional theories about consciousness and the functioning of the brain. These skills can appear and disappear suddenly and without explanation. Their skills are all the more remarkable because the savants [usually] lack the education and cognitive abilities normally associated with their talents. Many of these skills involve their amazing memories, which are so profound that they have difficulty forgetting anything.

...Science relies upon the scientific method, so when there was no "adequate" method for studying consciousness, it became a taboo subject for scientific inquiry... Consciousness research became respectable when it was tied to research on the brain. This was assisted by several major technological advances in the 1970s and 1980s.

Imaging technology enabled scientists to look at color-coded pictures of a subject's brain activity, the electron microscope allowed a more detailed look at neurons, and radioactive tracers enabled neural interconnections to be better defined. Additionally, biochemical techniques helped identify more than 100 chemical messengers in the brain.

The underlying hope was that consciousness could be understood by studying our gray matter, a belief that is analogous to understanding music by disassembling a CD player.

Nevertheless, contemporary science has come to assume that consciousness is [entirely] generated by the brain. The [foundation] for our memory is thought to be the complex pattern of networking among the brain's 100 billion neurons, each of which has an average of 50,000 connections with other neurons.

During learning we select and reinforce specific connections and pathways in this network.

Communication among neurons relies upon chemical messengers and electrical impulses between adjacent [that is, "local"] neurons. Since neurons in one person's head can't send messages via chemicals or electrical impulses to neurons of another person, the model doesn't allow for [any interaction between apparently separated—or "nonlocal"—beings].

[But] we are on the verge of another scientific revolution because scientists can no longer ignore data that are shifting their paradigm away from the “neurocentric” model of consciousness.

In fact, the greatest challenge to the current model comes from research on scientifically accepted phenomena that are raising questions with no easy answers. An example of such research concerns “the savant syndrome.”

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**SPECIAL MUSIC** (performed by Jaco on guitar): “**Leslie Is Different**” by Fred Small

The neighbor up the road brought the message  
Joe and May never had a phone  
Five children grown and gone to college  
Now they lived out on Pewaukee Lake alone  
And the nurse at the big Milwaukee hospital  
Said "We've got a baby here with no eyes  
It's retarded, it's got cerebral palsy  
Six months old living only to die  
And we remembered the tiny Englishwoman  
Used to hire out as a nurse-governess  
May Lemke, will you take this broken child off our  
hands?"  
And God loves a fool 'cause she said yes. She  
said:

**CHORUS:**

*Leslie is different  
Like everyone in the world  
He's kind of awkward, he's kind of fragile  
Kind of graceful, kind of tough  
He's kind of slow, he's kind of clever  
He's just Leslie and that's enough.*

He just lay there helpless and silent  
Not a tear, not a smile, not a word  
But they held him and rocked him and sang him to  
sleep  
And talked to him as if he really heard  
And he grew with the sun and affection  
Though his body was spindly and small  
And a hundred times they stood him with his hands  
upon the fence  
And a hundred times watched him fall  
And their daughters warned it was useless  
They said, "Mama, that boy will break your heart."  
She said, "Love never comes easy  
And miracles mostly come hard." She said:

**CHORUS:** *Leslie is different...*

May used to play the piano  
And sing the old songs from the war  
There was always music on the radio  
And the records she bought at the store  
And sometimes they swore he was  
listening  
Though of course there was no way to  
know  
Maybe he was flying in his own blue sky  
Where no one else would ever go  
Maybe he was lost in a forest  
Where demons and woodspirits dwell  
But for sixteen years he had never spoke  
a word  
Never taken one step for himself. But they  
said:

**CHORUS:** *Leslie is different...*

Along about three in the morning  
A ripple of music broke the night  
Joe's fallen asleep at the TV again  
May reached over to turn on the light  
But the music kept getting louder  
And the TV was quiet and cold  
Leslie was playing the piano  
And his fingers were agile and bold  
A Tchaikovsky piano concerto  
Like water breaking over a dam  
A river of ecstasy flowed through his  
hands  
And each note cried out, "I am." Because

**CHORUS:** *Leslie is different...*

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**SERMON: CLOUDS OF CONSCIOUSNESS** by Jaco B. ten Hove

The story of Leslie Lemke was put into song back in the 1980s by the excellent folksinger Fred Small, who is now an excellent Unitarian Universalist minister serving our congregation in Littleton, MA, since 1999. His angle in the song shows his UU inclinations, powerfully emphasizing our first principle, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” regardless of what kind of physical package we come in. We *all* have important gifts.

Meanwhile, the reading’s author, psychiatrist Diane Powell, makes a similar point in the title of her article: “We Are All Savants.” Although she’s not necessarily a UU (as far as I know), her title reflects both our first *and* our seventh principle—which respects “the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.” We are woven together by our common humanity, manifest in magnificent diversity, but united in a fundamental oneness, by which we are all connected. It is stirring, and instructive, to consider that “We Are All Savants”—“joining one voice to another voice, to another, together as chorus, now as one.”

I begin today’s presentation with mention of savants because they are irrefutable evidence of extraordinary abilities embedded in our human experience and evolution, perhaps indicating corridors of consciousness that the rest of us can barely imagine. Our rapidly expanding population also increases the statistical possibility for individuals who are able to naturally embody new expressions of human potential.

We all share a common humanity with Leslie Lemke, *and* he is indeed different, evidently a one-in-a-billion chance combination of attributes and disease. But he exists. (A quick Internet search will turn up lots of factual material about him, including some of his performances.) He exists and that’s enough, but were it not for the generous faith and spirit of one caretaking woman, his gifts might have been swamped away by demanding and demeaning circumstances.

May Lemke had a way of seeing beyond the expected, beyond the horror of a particular baby’s surface condition, to trust that the universe *is* unfolding in ways beyond our always limited view. Her openness to Leslie was unusual, perhaps, but she also represents any one of us as much as Leslie might *be* any one of us. We are not as separated from these possibilities as we tend to believe.

In fact, we all have our own generousities of spirit, as well as our unique combinations of attributes and disease. Maybe our story is not as dramatic as some, but we all have just as much potential for making significant contributions to the greater good—and to the evolution of our species.

I was especially moved to discover that Leslie Lemke and Kim Peek, the inspiration for the movie *Rain Man*, are both within a year of my own age, which gets my attention, believe me. Kim Peek was born, a few months after me, with enlarged head and a major brain stem “defect,” and was not expected to survive long. But before he was two years old he could memorize and recall every book read to him. He has now read thousands of books, all of which he can recall in detail.

He’s said to have the greatest memory every recorded, and he still travels the world to not just demonstrate remarkable abilities, but also to make a point, one that echoes Fred Small’s song about Leslie. In Kim Peek’s words:

*You don’t have to be handicapped to be different. Everyone is different!”*

[Darold Treffert, MD, “Kim Peek - The Real Rain Man,” online at <[http://www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org/savant\\_syndrome/savant\\_profiles/kim\\_peek#updates](http://www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org/savant_syndrome/savant_profiles/kim_peek#updates)>]

Barry Morrow, screenwriter for the movie *Rain Man*, commented:

*I don’t think anybody could spend five minutes with Kim and not come away with a slightly altered view of themselves, the world, and our potential as human beings.* [Ibid.]

An altered view of ourselves, yes, but science does not have very good explanations about how such extraordinary abilities emerge in what are usually severely compromised human bodies, often accompanied by the functional disability of autism. The way we treat these individuals—and have treated them—says a lot about who we are. I want to think we’re evolving in maturity as well, so that we can let who they are be enough *and* learn whatever they have to teach us, without minimizing their fundamental—and shared—humanity.

So follow me now into a hopefully helpful portrayal of some of what *I’ve* learned about what is haltingly called the science of human consciousness, stirred by the reality of savants among us. My humble goal is to open a few doors and take a look at what I think

are very intriguing prospects for potential evolutionary leaps toward solutions that will contribute to a more sustainable future.

In her article, Diane Powell goes on to note one path of brain research that shows how autistic people tend to use only separate sections of their brains, the left or right hemispheres, *without* the integration of both that characterizes so-called normal brain functioning. In fact, Kim Peek actually was born *without* the entire band of fibers (the corpus callosum) that is supposed to connect his two cerebral hemispheres.

But the currently dominant model of science would predict that highly complex abilities of savants would result from *greater* connectivity within the brain, not less. Kim Peek can read two books at the same time, one with each eye, probably *because* of his separated hemispheres. Evidently there is something about keeping the left and right brains from interfering with each other that unlocks some very focused abilities, even as it prevents other developmental capacities.

More studies of high-functioning autistic people suggest that because of this separation, they process information without the ability to “abstractify,” a word used by a study subject. They tend to rely on the part of the brain that focuses on detail. This is quite different from when the two hemispheres are cooperating in the use of abstract reasoning, which we tend to call “higher” functioning because it enables us to perceive a bigger picture of things.

But abstract reasoning also requires us to ignore lots of what we assume is unimportant detail; it forces us to jump to conclusions. This brings with it the tendency to see what we expect to see, and overlook lots of things that don’t fit with our assumptions. Savants and autistics, however, often lack the distraction of abstract reasoning, and can provide intricate and nonjudgmental, if sometimes tortured glimpses into this realm of detailed mystery.

Which brings me to what Diane Powell calls “the ghost in the machine.” She and her colleagues are developing a new model for understanding consciousness, based on the two primary branches of contemporary physics. You probably know about the traditional, mainstream Enlightenment science of the past 300 years or so, which is called “Classical” (or Newtonian) Physics, in which all forces operate locally, meaning only by physical contact with each other.

This Classical paradigm is still the dominant player in the world of science, but its exclusive perch is slipping. “The ghost in the machine” comes with a relatively new science called Quantum Physics, which proposes that forces can also operate *non-locally*, that is, without the physical contact required in Classical Physics.

So *Classical* Physics allows and governs only local forces—those in physical contact with each other. *Quantum* Physics tries to account for *nonlocal* forces that are *not* in physical contact. One does not replace the other; they both operate as one voice, joining together to describe a more complete reality.

In brain research, the new model of consciousness being explored by Diane Powell and others uses a similar distinction. Evidently, our brains also process information in two ways, both locally and nonlocally. Most so-called normal processing happens through direct contact and interaction along the billions of neural networks in the brain. This would be the Classical style.

But Quantum processing in our brain can somehow handle exponentially greater amounts of information at extreme speeds, and apparently without the requirement of immediate, local physical contact. Most of us have only a little access to this level of functioning; savants frequently have a lot.

They are able to process “information” in astonishingly detailed ways, at rates far beyond so-called normal human capacity. They may well be tapping into a quantum realm, perhaps pointing to possibilities for an evolutionary leap, perhaps opening pathways that could hold hope for finding more effective responses to our rather daunting global issues.

Perhaps; who knows? But I think it’s worth considering. I draw inspiration from this statement by that most thoughtful of US presidents, Abraham Lincoln, describing his era in ways that resonate with our own:

*The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.*

[“Annual Message to Congress—Concluding Remarks.” Wash., D.C. Dec. 1, 1862.]

Something is beginning to unfold that requires a different kind of microscope. Inasmuch as we cannot understand music by disassembling a CD player, so must we use new tools and

new routes to more fully apprehend our own consciousness. So as I try to think anew and at least stay open, let me briefly describe the pursuit of “nonlocal” reality from a different angle, as I’m able to grasp it.

Many of us have at least heard of the famous Butterfly Effect, which was articulated in the 1950s and named in the 60s. It suggests that the flap of a tiny wing on one continent can so affect the field around it as to ultimately help cause a tornado on another continent. Thus are apparently disparate events interconnected, *nonlocally*.

Now, I have said many times about our 7<sup>th</sup> UU principle—interdependence—that it means separation is actually an illusion; that the perceived space between you and me is in fact filled with molecules and energy invisible to our eyes, but nonetheless there and linking us. I can accept that oxygen is not empty space.

But from there, my glib affirmations of interdependence and interconnection have to gain a bit more spine to account for quantum nonlocality, which takes the Butterfly Effect to another level. It posits not just a linear ripple effect, but an ongoing relationship, with energy flow back and forth between distant objects and beings.

I can imagine that there are clouds of consciousness emanating from great fields of entangled energies of all the beings spread out over the planet. Maybe it’s part of “that mysterious thing which happens within us and between us,” as Michael Leger mentioned earlier in his Flaming Chalice Dedication.

But my main point today is that even as far-fetched as this might seem, it *could* be an invitation to a leap of consciousness that will point us toward ways out of the pretty scary dilemmas we’ve gotten ourselves into, such as how to equitably sustain a quality of life for all beings on an increasingly crowded and finite planetary surface.

As yet, we can’t see much clearly, but I want to believe that at any moment something could happen that will shake us out of our lethargy and disturb the escapist complicity that threatens to drag us all over the edge into some abyss of imbalance. It could be a major disaster, certainly, that finally and painfully forces us to make necessary changes.

But it could also be a profound leap of consciousness, one that right now seems out of the realm of possibility and probably isn’t even on our radar screen. I do think, however, that

there are some groups tucked away in corners of our culture that are building radar screens that might pick up signals of this sort, and I, for one, am interested in learning more about what they are suggesting, even as I might still maintain my overly rational skepticism.

The Institute of Noetic Sciences is one such organization, founded by astronaut Edgar Mitchell in 1973, two years after he came back from walking on the moon. Their website ([www.noetic.org](http://www.noetic.org)) explains the name thusly:

*The word “noetic” comes from the ancient Greek “noos.” for which there is no exact equivalent in English. It refers to “inner knowing,” a kind of intuitive consciousness—direct and immediate access to knowledge beyond what is available to our normal senses and the power of reason...*

*Noetic sciences are explorations into the nature and potentials of consciousness using multiple ways of knowing—including intuition, feeling, reason, and the senses. Noetic sciences explore the “inner cosmos” of the mind (consciousness, soul, spirit) and how it relates to the “outer cosmos” of the physical world.*

At the Institute of Noetic Sciences (based in Northern California, not surprisingly), researchers have, for 35 years now, used significantly scientific methods to explore the “noosphere” [know’-ess-fear], which is, evidently, the realm of all shared human knowledge, perhaps akin to Carl Jung’s concept of a Collective Unconscious.

(Have you ever found yourself saying something like—“Hey, this just came to me: what about X?” Or “Hey, this just came to me: let’s do Y.” It can seem like we get an idea *from* somewhere else, as if it just pops into our head—from the outside in...and maybe it does.)

The Institute of Noetic Sciences is attempting to stand on the forefront of Classical Physics, and then go beyond the expected, to learn just how the universe is unfolding in ways beyond our always limited view. They ask an intriguing and important question:

*How might a shift in consciousness transform present global conditions into a world grounded in freedom, wisdom and love?*

To this end, they create replicable experiments that dig below the surface of odd human encounters and theories, looking for insight and advances. They have been particularly interested in exploring the nonlocal dimension, and have sponsored the Global Consciousness Project, an ongoing and astoundingly technical methodology that tracks a network of dozens of sophisticated Random Number Generators across the planet.

A Random Number Generator continuously cranks out a steady stream of unconnected numbers, which can then be used for various purposes. Such devices have been used for millennia, in the form of coin flips, dice, the shuffling of cards and even yarrow stalks in the ancient Chinese symbol system, the I Ching.

But recent developments in super fast computers have enabled a large increase in the capacity of modern mechanical Random Number Generators. This, in turn, has allowed a greater reach into more sensitive arenas not previously tested, such as, say, accumulating evidence of a global consciousness—a nonlocal “field” of some sort of energy, generated by and between human beings on the planet.

Starting about 10 years ago, researchers aligned with the Institute of Noetic Sciences placed Random Number Generators across the globe and began watching all the reliably *unordered* data for any patterns that might correlate with large-scale events in human culture. Their scientific curiosity led them to wonder if there were any noticeable—and thus, documented—correlations that might indicate something was moving in the noosphere when dramatic events got the attention of large numbers of people.

They have tracked otherwise unexplainable patterns that did show up at multiple locations during periods immediately before, during or after hundreds of significant moments, such as New Years Eve at Y2K, a number of intentional World Meditations, a solar eclipse, the Olympics, a World Cup Soccer “shootout,” as well as sudden disasters and tragedies, such as the Indian Ocean tsunami, Benazir Bhutto’s assassination, and, certainly, the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

To take just that last, most regionally dramatic event, they saw very significant coherence in Random Number Generators on the morning of 9/11. I’ll let the director of the project describe their rather tentative, but intriguing conclusion:

*We do not know if there is such a thing as a global consciousness, but if there is, it was moved by the events of September 11, 2001. It appears that the coherence and intensity of our common reaction created a sustained pulse of order in the random flow of numbers from our instruments. These patterns where there should be none look like reflections of our concentrated focus, as the riveting events drew us from our individual concerns and melded us into an extraordinary coherence. Maybe we became, briefly, a global consciousness.*

[Roger Nelson, “September 11, 2001: Exploratory and Contextual Analyses,”  
online at <http://noosphere.princeton.edu/>]

The Global Consciousness Project web site explains how these and other correlated results, while often subtle, are nonetheless way beyond statistical chance. So it appears, scientifically, that something invisible *is* going on in the noosphere, where we may all be interconnected in ways Classical Physics cannot explain.

At least that is one possible understanding. Lots of questions and uncertainties remain. In many ways we are still where English astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington was in 1927, during the beginnings of quantum physics, when he commented as he scratched his head in wonder: “Something unknown is doing we don’t know what.”

The long-standing human inclination toward prayer is another way this dimension plays out. Prayer can be and has been explored as a nonlocal phenomenon. Can people in one place call to mind and heart others at a distance and effect some positive change in them? Is nonlocal healing possible and, more to my point today, provable?

There have been a steady stream of efforts to explore prayerful intentions using scientific methods, and, as far as I can tell, the jury is still out. [See Marilyn M. Schlitz, “Can Science Study Prayer?” SHIFT #12, Sept.-Nov. 2006, pg. 38.] There *is* documentation that individuals can bring about prayerful benefit for themselves, but there have not been any successful studies showing a measurable positive effect on others at a distance.

So, as I look over all this material, I suspect we have an unanswered question or two, which are, as Rachel Naomi Remen reminds us, fine traveling companions that help sharpen our eye for the road. Along this dynamic human journey of ours, individually and collectively, we endeavor to make sense of our widening world. We inquire of the inner cosmos and the outer cosmos, “joining one voice to another voice, to another, together as chorus, now as one.”

A global consciousness? Quantum nonlocal influences? An interdependent web of all existence? Perhaps; who knows? The savants among us testify, in their own ways, to the intricate and amazing, if sometimes disturbing possibilities of the human animal. They also inspire in us a large degree of care for the whole of our *shared* humanity.

We may all be savants, in our own way, but we don’t all get to go to the moon, as did Edgar Mitchell, who had an epiphany on the return flight, which he described thusly:

*My understanding of the distinct separateness and relative independence of movement of these cosmic bodies was shattered. I was overwhelmed with the sensation of physically and mentally extending out into the cosmos. The restraints and boundaries of flesh and bone fell away.*

[Quoted by Barbara McNeill, "Cosmic Activist," SHIFT #12, Sept. - Nov. 2006, pg. 8.]

From the macro view of Edgar Mitchell in his spacesuit, to the haunting micro interiors of Leslie Lemke and Kim Peek, we *all* see things differently, and any one of us might, in the next moment, discover a new pathway that will offer great hope to our kind and our planet, to fulfill a vision of freedom, wisdom and love.

So if nothing else, we may be deeply inspired to cultivate a steady spirit of loving-kindness, a worthy and often challenging project of its own. But we have a great aid in this effort: song #1031, "Filled with Loving-Kindness" (which was put together by former Paint Brancher Mark Hayes, now the minister at our church in State College, PA)...

### **CLOSING WORDS**

Hey, this just came to me: Let's create a shift in consciousness that will "transform present global conditions into a world grounded in freedom, wisdom and love"!

Let's honor "that mysterious thing which happens within us and between us," "resounding with the dawn to sing awake the light," and filling us with loving-kindness, that we may be whole.

And let's "join one voice to another voice, to another, together as chorus, now as one" to express our connection with the Spirit of Life, as we sing that prayer...

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