



## Big Ideas

### The marriage of heaven and hell

#### William Blake 1790

At first sight (and perhaps even at second and third sight) *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* would seem to have little or nothing to say to nurses and nurse educators. William Blake was an artist, poet and mystic who produced only nine copies of this hand-written, hand-printed and beautifully illustrated book between 1789 and 1790.<sup>1</sup> The book comprises a mere 27 pages and amounts to less than 5000 words and, as the title suggests, has an overtly religious theme. At first sight, then, this appears to be a book of metaphysics, but closer inspection reveals that it is in fact far more.

Written shortly after the French and American revolutions of the late 18th century and on the cusp of the industrial revolution, Blake responded to the new Enlightenment age of reason and empirical science, not with a rejection, but with an appeal to frame rationality and empiricism within a larger and more expansive vista. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is a combination of prose, poetry, aphorisms, allegory and striking visual imagery. It begins by setting out a series of 'Contraries' necessary for progression: attraction and repulsion; reason and energy; love and hate; good and evil. Blake continues:

Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.

At this point, Blake's thinking takes an interesting and unexpected (we might even say postmodern) turn. Whereas all 'Bibles or sacred codes' promote a Cartesian body–soul dualism in which 'Energy, call'd Evil, is alone from the Body' and 'Reason, call'd Good, is alone from the Soul', Blake suggests in its place a rather interesting and unusual monist position. In a section titled 'The voice of the devil', he suggests that:

1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.
2. Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy
3. Energy is Eternal Delight.

Blake identifies organised religion, and Christianity in particular, as promoting a false dichotomy according to which reason, empiricism and restraint (embodied in the form of the Angel) are set up in opposition to 'poetic' thinking and unbounded imagination (the Devil or Satan). Thus, when Blake warned at the start of his book that 'a new heaven is begun', he was referring to the advent of the scientific empiricism and technical rationalism that was powering the industrial revolution. However, rather than regarding energy and reason as opposites or conflicting principles, Blake proposes the

<sup>1</sup> The text of the book can be found in most anthologies of Blake's poetry and prose. There have also been a number of facsimiles of the original illustrated manuscript. See, for example, Blake, W. (1975) *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (introduction and commentary by Geoffrey Keynes), Oxford University Press, Oxford.

'marriage of Heaven and Hell' of the title. Body and soul, reason and energy, are aspects of a greater whole. The physical world of which we are aware is merely that small portion discernable by our five senses of a far greater reality, and empirical reasoning, logical thought and scientific calculation constrain rather than expand our horizons. Thus, in the first of a series of 'memorable fancies', Blake imagines returning to the 'abyss of the five senses' after a walk among the fires of Hell, that is, beyond the constraints of his 'finite organical perception', where 'a mighty Devil folded in black clouds ... wrote the following sentence':

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way  
Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?

Blake is not making a case for *a priori* knowing, that is, for 'internal' knowledge prior to experience. He is an empiricist who believes that we acquire our knowledge from 'out there', but his notion of the scope of what lies 'out there' extends far beyond what our senses are able to perceive. What he objects to, then, is *scientific* empiricism, the view that only sense data derived from particular methods of looking at the world are valid and reliable. For Blake, validity is achieved not by restricting and disciplining our perception, but by opening it up. We do not need to employ carefully controlled and scientifically validated methods in order to arrive at the truth, since 'Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and not be believ'd'.

Why, he asks, do we assume that what we perceive with our five senses is all that there is? Of course, we now know that Blake was right; that there is a far larger world 'out there' beyond the reach of our senses in the form of infra red and ultra violet light, infra- and ultra-sonic sound and who knows what else. Some birds do indeed perceive a world 'closed to our senses five' by being aware of the earth's magnetic field; dogs and bats hear sound where we experience only silence; snakes 'see' what we experience only as heat; and some fish navigate by sensing electric currents. We are constrained by our common-sense notion that 'seeing is believing' and that empirical science can tell us everything there is about the world. In contrast, Blake asserts that:

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

Blake can therefore be regarded as an empiricist in the broadest sense of the term, arguing that the method of science has narrowed our perceptions and hence restricted our view and understanding of the universe.

In the intervening two centuries since Blake first warned against the seductive and comforting reductionism of rational empirical science, the scientific worldview has continued further to shape our definition and perception of reality. In the discipline of nursing, as in most applied fields, practice is expected whenever possible to be based on evidence from scientific research. The methods of empirical science, and the experimental method in particular, are considered to

provide us with the best (and for some, the only) access to truth, a state of affairs anticipated by Blake when he wrote:

I have always found that Angels have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning.

As we have seen, Blake used the term 'Angels' to denote the voice of rational scientific empiricism, and we need only replace 'Angels' with 'scientists' for Blake's statement to have a modern-day resonance in what we now refer to as scientism, the view that scientific thought is superior to other ways of understanding the world. Blake is not *against* empiricism; he is not setting up scientific rationality (Heaven) in opposition to the poetic imagination (Hell). He is simply saying that empirical science and systematic reasoning should know their place, and if taken to the extreme, the method of science restricts rather than expands our knowledge.

There are a number of other lessons that nurse educationists and academics might take from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* apart from the limitations to knowledge imposed by rational thought and systematic reasoning. First, and most overtly, Blake provides us with a practical demonstration of what a book might be. University text books are becoming more and more concerned with providing information and instruction in the form of bullet points and summaries, along with the explicit translation of facts into 'good practice' in the form of case studies and exemplars. Publishers of text books often assume a readership with short attention spans and limited patience, a readership which needs to be spoon-fed the relevant facts and information, and which must be constantly reminded of what they have just read and told in advance what they are about to read. Whilst such an approach is usually justified as pedagogically sound, it could be argued that it encourages and promotes shallow learning which is quickly forgotten once the purpose for reading it (usually an examination or other assignment) has passed. In contrast, Blake's book is exquisitely beautiful, infuriatingly unstructured and deliberately elusive. It demands multiple readings and re-readings and invites the reader to interpret the text and 'read in' their own thoughts and ideas; it is, in effect, an interactive text two hundred years before the concept was invented.

Second, Blake does not seek to smooth over difference and arrive at a consensual view. Blake has written the very antithesis of a text book; he is not concerned with providing answers but rather with asking questions. He is not (in the late eighteenth century) concerned with the classic nineteenth century modernist Hegelian dialectic of thesis–antithesis–synthesis, but with twentieth century postmodern deconstruction. He does not want to synthesise opposites into a con-

sensually agreed position; on the contrary, his starting point is the aphorism: 'opposition is true friendship'. As we have seen, Blake believed that progress arises through conflict and that the purpose of scholarship is to expand our perception of the world through the removal of self-imposed constraints.

Clearly, Blake's approach to education is not didactic. He attempts to convey his thinking through a mixture of 'Memorable Fancies' and a list of short, pithy aphorisms under the heading of 'Proverbs of Hell', where, as we have seen, 'Hell' is Blake's term for the poetic stance against scientific empiricism. In each case, the reader has to work hard in order to arrive at meaning. For example, the proverb 'A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees' is open to a number of interpretations, including the very point that we each see and interpret the world differently. Similarly, the proverb 'Improve[me]nt makes strait roads; but the crooked roads without Improvement are roads of Genius' could be read as a plea for spontaneity or perhaps as an endorsement of action based on tacit intuitive knowing. The most important idea for educationalists to take from Blake is the need to free our students to think in creative and unfettered ways, since 'What is now proved was once only imagin'd'.

In fact, Blake's educational approach can be discerned from one of his 'memorable fancies' in which he tells us 'I was in a Printing house in Hell & saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation'. For Blake, the transmission of knowledge does not occur through didactic instruction in the form of lectures, textbooks or PowerPoint presentations, but rather by 'printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid'. Education is not concerned with filling empty vessels but with acknowledging that they are already full; the role of the teacher is not to instruct but to remove barriers to perception 'by corrosives ... melting apparent surfaces away', thereby helping the student to look differently at the world and to see what was formerly hidden. As we have seen, Blake believed that the doctrine of scientific realism has caused us to close ourselves in, so that, in his words, we see all things through narrow chinks of our cavern. Education, *real* education, is simply the process of cleansing the doors of our perception so that things might appear to us as they really are.

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