

On Aldous Huxley
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

One way to look at reading is as an exchange, or conversation, between an author and a reader. That is the approach I'm taking with this thought. This thought contains my commentaries, my side of a conversation, in response to his biographer's characterizations of the novelist and essayist Aldous Huxley (Nicholas Murray, *Aldous Huxley: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002). My comments are informed by my reading of a fair amount of Huxley's writings, both fiction and non-fiction.

Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) was British-born and lived the latter part of his life in the United States. He wrote voluminously, and is best known for his novel *Brave New World*, published in 1932. *Brave New World* is the ironic depiction of a "utopia" in which people are brainwashed into subordination, accommodation, and a mindless, shallow, though happy, existence by the government and its agents. It is often compared to George Orwell's 1948 book, *1984*, which describes a more heavy-handed and brutal subjugation of the citizenry. Later in life, Huxley became associated with spiritual and mystical concerns and experimentation with drugs reputed to be mind-expanding, such as mescaline.

In small type are excerpts from the Murray biography, all with reference to Huxley. Following each excerpt, in larger type, is my commentary on that particular excerpt. Quotes in every case but one, and that exception is indicated, are Huxley speaking.

"Born into the rain, I have always felt a powerful craving for the light."

It appears that light to Huxley means awareness, understanding, perhaps even enlightenment, and rain its opposite. Particularly the last decade, a central element of my life has been the quest for light with regard to both the world and myself. All of my writing this past decade, including this thought, has been a part of my effort to, as it were, come out of the rain.

He was an accurate prophet who became steadily more disillusioned with the uses to which science was being put in his time. His was an early voice for the ecology movement, which gathered pace after his death. He

warned against the dangers of nuclear weapons, over-population, exhaustion of the world's natural resources, militarism, and destructive nationalism. His subtler messages—about the corrosive effects of modern consumer capitalism and brainwashing by advertising, about the slow surrender of freedom—have made his most famous work, *Brave New World*, in many ways a more accurate prophecy than Orwell's *1984*.

To Huxley's credit, he raised these fundamental concerns many decades ago, and his insights about mind control and conditioning are enormously valuable. With that said, I don't consider *Brave New World* to be a more accurate prophecy than *1984*. I think the most accurate depiction of the way people are indoctrinated and managed by those in power combines, integrates, Huxley's book and Orwell's. That is to say, those who control us employ both the carrot and the stick. Intimidation, fear, punishment, keep us in line as much as propaganda, conditioning, and distraction. Big Brother, and that includes in America in our time, comes down hard if we don't go along with the program: ridicule, vilification, marginalization and exclusion, economic reprisal, even imprisonment and death. Getting free involves more than waking up to what is going on; it also involves having the savvy and character to live in alignment with our awareness in the face of the blows that will reign down on anybody who gets caught bucking the system.

He considered no subject, however abstruse, alien to him. The wide-ranging intellectual, acknowledging no disciplinary boundaries, nor feeling the need to kow-tow to the appointed custodians of this or that area of knowledge, if not extinct is certainly an endangered species.

This is the direction I am taking, trying to see how it all fits together, which includes both public and personal concerns, and, the best I can, not kow-towing to anybody who disapproves of how I go at things or the conclusions I reach. I am committed to not playing my life to the crowd.

“If one looks at his face one gets the first impression of immense intelligence, but this is not unusual among artists. What is much more remarkable and almost peculiar to him is the radiance of serenity and loving-kindness on his features; one no longer feels ‘what a clever man’ but ‘what a good man,’ a man at peace with himself.”

To me, being a good man comes down to doing the honorable thing regardless of the consequences; and choice-by-choice, action-by-action, that is what I am trying to do. These days, I am at peace with myself—I'm OK with me, what I am, what I am doing; I approve of myself. But I am not peaceful: I'm jittery, anxious. A goal for myself is to become peaceful, to experience, moment to moment, calmness, tranquility, a sense of being home, peacefulness, while at the same time remaining engaged with the people and events in my world. I don't want to withdraw from the world.

“He made himself into an instrument of music . . . his voice was the gentlest melody.”

I'm taken by this metaphor, being an instrument of music. Along with our body and posture and movements, our voice is part of our instrument, and we need to cultivate it.

“It happened when I was about sixteen and a half, and I got this attack of keratitis that left one eye about nine-tenths blind and affected the other quite badly. I was unable to do any reading for nearly two years. I had to leave school and I had to have private tutors. I learned to read Braille. . . . I was able, after about two years, to read with a rather powerful magnifying glass and went through the university on that basis.”

The hits we take in life are also gifts. The loss of sight, which Huxley partly regained, grounded him, sensitized him, gave impetus to creativity and to the desire to do something important with his life, and to be himself. My deafness, which I experienced much later in life, has been a great loss, but, and I'm seeing this more with each passing day, it has also been a great gift. In the thought “On Chuck Davey” in this web site I put it this way: “My experience seems to be teaching me that everything bad that happens to us short of death, even the most painful and debilitating things--the loss of a job or a cherished relationship, public disfavor and rejection, serious illness, the death of a loved one, whatever it is—contains within it the opportunity for growth and creation and a more honorable and richer, more gratifying, more rewarding, life. This is not to say that these bad things don't hurt us, or that they don't diminish us—indeed, I am saddened and diminished by my hearing loss (as well as some other losses I've experienced these past few years). It is to

offer that they don't *only* hurt and lessen us. They also--at least potentially--enrich us, uplift us, open up new possibilities. In every hit short of our own inevitable death is a gift. Amid the grief and regret and diminishment, we need to find the gift, the opportunities, the new paths, the new capabilities, and take action to make those real in our lives."

This dousing of the light at a crucial point in his adolescent development cut him off from sports and "a great many ordinary kinds of outlets for social communication with people my own age; and it did stimulate a tendency which I think I have by temperament, a tendency towards solitude and contemplation."

My hearing loss has prompted me to move in the direction of what I have come to realize is natural to me as well: solitude and contemplation. It has been my experience that we are given what we need to become ourselves and manifest that in the way we live our lives. The challenge is to be vigilant for the lessons and nudges we get from life, even when they involve pain and loss.

"Men make use of their illnesses at least as much as they are made use of by them."

Or at least potentially they do. Most often, I'm afraid, they are used by their illnesses, diminished by them, crushed by them. They compound their illnesses by adding hurt to themselves and others rather than doing all they can to use them to their advantage.

He reported to his father of the butterflies "shining like new minted coins"—his eyesight clearly functioning again and his alert attentiveness to the beauty of nature undimmed.

I need to connect with the wonder of nature while there is still time.

Until his death he was preoccupied with the relationship of mind and body, with the way in which the body often hampered and constrained the mind—but also how mind needed to discover the right sort of relationship with the body.

While I was a very active in sport into my early twenties, it was not until my subsequent involvement in dance—I was in a modern

dance company—that I experienced and began to concern myself with the relationship of mind and body. The challenge is to engage in those physical activities, and with such a mind-set, that we are brought closer to our ideal corporal form in a Platonic sense, and that the undertakings contribute to a harmonious, peaceful, honest-to-ourselves, efficacious, responsible, and personally gratifying life.

“Sometimes in winter/Sea-birds follow the plough,/And the bare field is all alive with wings,/With their white wings and unafraid alightings,/Sometimes in winter. And will they come again?”

Huxley is not known for his poetry, but I was moved by this poem. I had such joy this year watching the bluebirds that came to my birdfeeder (first one I’ve ever had). Will the bluebirds—literally and metaphorically—return for me? How much time do I have left?

“ . . . a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced, because they love their servitude.”

This is a major theme of *Brave New World*. I don’t know that they love their servitude, but the great majority of slaves in our time are happy enough, or at least acquiescent (or are they quietly desperate?). In any case, the point I made a bit ago, slaves know the master’s whip is always at hand.

Huxley’s novel [*Brave New World*] was written to warn against contemporary trends but also the whole notion of Utopia itself, the idea that one could design a perfect blueprint and then impose it.”

Utopian schemes have done great harm to the human condition: among them, communism, socialism, National Socialism, and the welfare state. The one system—not a utopia; those who created it realized the fallibility of human beings in both mind and deed--that holds my allegiance is the constitutional republican form of government in the United States of America (which, incidentally, is not the same thing as a democracy). The American political system allows human beings to be as free and self-determining (my most cherished values) as can reasonably be attained. I don’t grant any individual, or any group, the power to decide what I am to think and what I am to do with my life. I am a man: my mind is my own,

my life in my own; I'm no one's pawn. The founders of my country gave me the chance to be a man, and I'm incredibly grateful.

Huxley saw that "half-wits" were on the increase and said the only remedy was in "encouraging the normal and super-normal members of the population to have larger families and preventing the sub-normal from having any families at all."

Insensitively phrased, but in my view a legitimate concern. It strikes me how many great minds of the past involved themselves with eugenics, the quality of human beings and its improvement. I wrote an article on the first president of Stanford University, David Starr Jordan (see the reference in "Short Writings, 2001-2005"; also, it is reprinted in my book, *Living White*). Jordan was a participant in a very active eugenics movement in the 1920s along with a number of other prominent people. Of course, going public with this concern in our time is to come under intense fire. My guess, however, is that current genetic research will underscore the importance of nature in contrast to nurture, and that in the near future, in one form or another, and perhaps with some other label, eugenics is going to be viewed as a legitimate frame of reference and basis of organization and action.

Huxley considers the increase in population generally . . . the need to control it has to be confronted. . . . World leaders are fiddling while Rome burns: "They play power politics and prepare for new wars . . . while the population of the world increases at the rate of 55,000 a day and while erosion destroys every day an equal or perhaps a greater number of acres of fertile land."

There were around 350 million people on earth in the year 1300. Now, there are around six-and-a-half *billion*. At the time of World War II, the United States population was around 130 million. Now it is around 300 million. Wisconsin has around five-and-a-half million people; the country of Bangladesh, which is about the size of Wisconsin, has 150 million people. At the present rate of growth, the United States in a century will have a population of 500 million. My home state, Vermont, a beautiful place, a wonderful place to live, has a population of around a half million. It has struck me that my state has no control of immigration. I imagine Vermont in, say, 100 years, with 15 or 20 million people. I recently visited Seattle.

Gorgeous Mount Rainier, lovely old homes, but the dirt and debris are noticeable, and it is inhumanly congested, one big traffic jam. What politician is talking about any of this?

“What happens to someone who becomes truly free?”

I raised this issue in a book I wrote on education, *While There is Time* (see the reference in the books section of the writings page on this web site). I wrote in that book: “You who are reading this, looking back on your own childhood, if you knew then what you know now, how would you have spent those years if you had been free? And right now in your life: how free are you? How much do you own your life? How much do you believe in what you are doing with your life? What would you do with your life if you were truly free?”

He urged that “the doctrine of the essential spiritual unity of man” be taken seriously. . . . “There is left the belief in a spiritual reality in which all men have access and in which they are united. Such a belief is the best metaphysical environment for pacifism.” . . . His adoption of the pacifist cause was not a mere intellectual interest. It was a spiritual discovery.

I’ve read a fair amount of Huxley, and frankly, I can’t come to grips with the referent of his use of the word “spiritual.” Spiritual looks good on a page and rings well in spoken conversation, but I have never connected with the reality of that concept. And I have never been able to experience the unity of man at any level beyond the conceptual. The most I have been able to come to is love and friendship for a few particular people and an identification with, and concern for, those I consider to be my people: European heritage white people. I wish every human being on this planet well, I don’t want to see anybody suffer; but at the same time, I don’t feel united with Kenyans and Tibetans, that’s the truth of it. The term pacifist pretty much fits me, but I don’t think I had to ascribe to a doctrine of the essential unity of man to get to that stance; I am simply fed up with wars, even the “good” ones. My views are expressed in an article called “Belgium in July” (see the “Short Writings, 2001-2005 references and the book *Living White*): “There’s a tower in Flanders called the Yzertoren that must be thirty stories high, a remarkable site standing alone in the middle of a big

field, and at the top of the tower it says, 'No More War.' I won't ever forget that tower or that sentiment."

His early writings about peace stress the need for a reformation of the individual life as much as they talk about questions of power and military policy.

My writings in the last few years have stressed the reformation, to use Huxley's word, of the individual and the relationship of that process to the central public issues of our time. I think we need to keep in mind that important change doesn't always come about because organizations and leaders make it happen. It also takes comes about because you and I as individuals act day-to-day, right where we are, in our jobs and families and social connections, with awareness and honor and persistence. As I put it in my afterword to the book, *Race and the American Prospect* (see "Recent Short Writings"): "It's all important: little things add up to big things, and little things pave the way to bigger things, and small acts of integrity and courage can inspire others."

Huxley started to have daily sessions with [physical therapist F. M. Alexander] in which his whole posture, physical movement, and performance of simple daily actions, was subject to "kinesthetic" re-education. . . . What attracted Huxley to this technique . . . was the way it highlighted the relationship between body and mind. By focusing on "the data of organic reality" to the exclusion of "the insane life of fantasy" it made it possible for "the physical organism to function as it ought to function, thus improving the general state of physical and mental health."

The Alexander technique sessions appear to have helped Huxley . . . for a time. The problem, as I see it, is that the Alexander sessions were something that was *to* Huxley, and when they ended that was it. They, or things like them, were not things that Huxley *did*, and they were not things he integrated into his life for the long term. And indeed, he experienced physical ailments all his life—fatigue, insomnia, high blood pressure, eczema, nasal catarrh, and more. As for "organic reality" versus the "insane world of fantasy," working in a university as I do, I consider myself well versed in this distinction. I have taken on the challenge to literally ground my thinking, in my body; thus the references in these web site thoughts to Foucault, Mishima, the concept of the warrior, and so on.

Huxley wanted to explore the notion that ideas—and in particular mystical ideas, ideas that challenged the world of realpolitik—were as powerful as economics. He would explore this systematically in [his essay collection] *The Perennial Philosophy*.

I read the *Perennial Philosophy* collection, but I'm not the one to tell you what a mystical idea is. I have the same problem with the term mystical that I have with spiritual. I can recite its dictionary definition, but I can't point to its unique referent in inner or outer reality. I do believe that, as the title of the late philosopher Richard Weaver's book put it, ideas have consequences. Ideas have shaped the way people perceive and act in the world. Marxist ideas have shaped economics, and so on. But we need to keep in mind that it works the other way too: economic and political and demographic, etc., realities shape ideas. For example, you could deduce from economic realities to the ideology of modern feminism and not miss it by much.

“Self-hood is a heavy, hardly translucent medium that cuts off most of the light of reality and distorts what little it permits to pass.” We should “stand in our own light” in order to see the eternal truths.

The way I would put it is to say that, for many if not most of us, our self-hood, our sense of who we are and where we fit in the scheme of things, has been externally imposed, and that it doesn't square with who we decide we really are upon serious reflection. Directly and indirectly, we are defined: by our family, by our social class position, by the schools we attend, by our religion, by politicians, by the media, by our peers, and by work institutions; and we can simply live our lives accordingly and get the pay-offs of others' respect and accolades and awards and a lengthy favorable obituary in the newspaper. The problem with that, though, is a gnawing, inner, felt sense that keeps informing us that “this life isn't it,” and over time, that'll drive us to drink or an affair with the secretary. I don't know what “standing in our own light” means, and the closest I've come to what I considered permanent truths are that love exists and we are going to die.

Huxley says the appeal of the mystical tradition is that it provides the non-Christian with a “religion free from unacceptable dogmas, which

themselves are contingent upon ill-established and arbitrarily-interpreted facts.”

If I were to become mystical, or spiritual, or religious, whatever the term--and I can all but guarantee I am not going to do that--it wouldn't happen through Christianity. Basically, I see Christianity as an other-worldly Middle Eastern doctrine that has been imposed on European people, and that it isn't natural to us—or anyway it isn't natural to me.

Huxley believed firmly that a world without the light from mysticism would be “totally blind and insane.”

It appears I am just the opposite. I think the “light from mysticism” is part and parcel of being “totally blind and insane.” Mysticism, broadly defined, in my view, has contributed to more stupidity and hurtfulness and unhappiness than anything I can think of. I think we have to come to grips with the truth that, as the late comic Flip Wilson put it, “What you see is what you get!” This is it. You're looking at it. Make the most of it while you have the chance. There isn't anything else.

The purpose of life, for the mystic, is to connect to the divine ground of all existence.

I dealt with the idea of a divine ground of existence in a discussion of a pantheistic philosophy/religion the late William Pierce devised early in his life (see the chapter on cosmotheism in my book, *The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds*). I tried to do justice to Pierce's formulations, but here again, I couldn't connect with the reality of the divine. In Pierce's later years, he referenced himself more and more in what I consider to be very real phenomena: the natural world and race.

He attacked “technological imperialism,” and mechanization that was “increasing the power of a minority to exercise a coercive control over the lives of their fellows” and the “popular philosophy of life . . . now molded by advertising copy whose one idea is to persuade everybody to be as extraverted and uninhibitedly greedy as possible, since of course it is only the possessive, the restless, the distracted, who spend money on things that advertisers want to sell.” He talked of non-attachment, “standing out

in one's own light," and turning one's back on the "universal craving" that consumer capitalism has fostered.

I have studied the media pretty intensely the past few years (I've written about it and developed a university course in media studies), and have come to realize just how much our experience of the world and ourselves is mediated. We are being shown and told things by our parents and churches and the schools we attend and our friends and acquaintances, and, so very important, by the mass media (television, films, the music industry, video games, journalists, and the Internet). And yes indeed, we are taught, and especially by the media, a "popular philosophy of life," a way to make sense of the world and live in it, and yes, consumerism is a big part of that. But I think Huxley emphasized the consumerism aspect of things too much. The consumer capitalism lens he employed is too narrow. Orwell in *1984* gives a more complete picture, as he demonstrates how those who control the idea flow, as it were, tell us what happened in history and what is happening now and who we are in contrast to *them*, and what to accept and support and what to repel and destroy, and basically how to live, and that goes way beyond the indoctrination to subscribe to a capitalist ideal and buy as much as possible.

"The politics of those whose goal is beyond time is always pacific; it is the idolators of past and future, of reactionary memory and Utopian dream, who do the persecuting and make the wars."

It does appear that being beyond time, as Huxley calls it, leads to the pacific. In time, the Inquisition and World War I and Mao's Red Guards and the Vietnam war made sense. Beyond time, they appear absurd, sad, stupid, cruel, and simply shameful.

He referred to the findings of Sir Cyril Burt that the average IQ of children was falling.

Scholars in our time are persecuted for saying that IQ exists and that there is a connection between IQ and accomplishment and the quality of life. I refer to, among others, Arthur Jensen, Charles Murray, J. Philippe Rushton, and Richard Lynn, whose doctoral degrees and university or think tank credentials do not prevent people who know little or nothing about their areas of speciality

from ridiculing and mocking and attacking them. The story of history, however, seems to indicate that, in the long run, truth wins out over dogma, vested interest, and brute force.

“I was on the spot and willing, indeed eager, to be a guinea pig. Thus it came about that, that one bright May morning, I swallowed four-tenths of a gramme of mescaline dissolved in a half glass of water.” . . . He was looking at a small glass vase containing three flowers. He had noticed them earlier in the day but now he saw them with different eyes: “I was not looking now at an unusual flower arrangement. I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence.”

I’m given to think that what Huxley saw was another example of what he calls “the insane life of fantasy.” The best I can recommend is to spend a couple of minutes, cold sober, gazing, without thinking, at a flower or a mountain stream and doing the best you can to see it for the first time.

To his second wife, Laura: “I love you very much and only wish I could love you more and better—could love you so that you would be well always, and strong and happy; so that there would never be that discrepancy between a tragic suffering face and the serenity of the nymph’s lovely body with its little breasts and the flat belly, the long legs . . . that I love so tenderly, so violently.”

A life fully lived includes love. We can at least try to find love and live in its glow, with the understanding that we may not be successful in our search.

In his chapters on education [in his collection, *Brave New World Revisited*], Huxley sketched a mode of resistance, “an education first of all in facts and values—the facts of individual diversity and genetic uniqueness and the values of freedom, tolerance, and mutual charity that are the ethical corollaries of these facts.” He called for decentralization and small self-organizing communities (even within the great metropolises where people were increasingly forced to live) to resist “the current drift towards totalitarian control of everything’ and turn back the powers of “Big Business and Big Government.”

I can subscribe to Huxley’s facts and values. I don’t have his faith in de-centralization and small communities, however. Totalitarianism

can come in small packages. Truth be told, I don't want to be in any community. I want to love and be there for those I love, and to do some honest, self-expressive work, and to read and watch films and enjoy a good meal, and travel some, and have a few good friends. I'd like a clean and well-furnished home, and a car that runs well, and to be in good health for a few years longer. Individual diversity includes the right to be left alone, and I want to be left alone. No self-governing communities for me, thank you.

Huxley was diagnosed with cancer in 1960. "You are getting terribly remote, she said" "I feel remote, he replied."

The late Susan Sontag wrote about two kingdoms: the kingdom of the sick and the kingdom of the well. I remember when I had a heart attack and nearly died and spent days that turned into weeks in intensive care, how I felt in a separate realm; the kingdom of the sick is a good label for it. My people were other sick people, in their wheel chairs and shuffling along with their walkers, and the doctors and, bless them, the nurses. I'll never forget the moment when the doctor, his interns and residents standing behind him, said you can go home. Me? I can go home?? As I checked out of the hospital, at the front desk, I felt excitement and awe and apprehension about what should have seemed a simple return to normal life. But it was as if I were entering a new land, a strange land—the kingdom of the well. This was fourteen years ago, and I was as alone then as I am now, so I took a taxi home. I remember the wonderment, the newness I felt, the gratitude for this second chance, as I directed the cab driver to my house. The feeling of being a foreigner in a strange land has never left me. I've never talked about it until now.

He worked in his pajamas and wrote sitting at a typewriter as long as possible. Then, when he felt too weak to sit up, he would lie in bed and write in large block letters on a yellow folio pad. If he felt too weak for writing he would dictate into a tape-recorder that stood by his bed.

I have a strong impulse to write. I can only wait to see whether it is still there during my last days.

On his deathbed Huxley wrote: "The world is an illusion, but it is an illusion that we must take seriously, because it is real as far as it goes, and in those aspects of reality that we are capable of apprehending. Our

business is to wake up. We have to find ways in which to detect the whole of reality in the one illusionary part that our self-centered consciousness permits us to see. We must not live thoughtlessly, taking our illusion for the complete reality, but at the same time we must not live too thoughtfully in the sense of trying to escape from the dream state. We must continually be on our watch for ways in which we may enlarge our consciousness. We must not attempt to live outside the world, which is given us, but we must learn how to transform it and transfigure it. Too much 'wisdom' is as bad as too little wisdom, and there must be no magic tricks. We must learn to come to reality without the enchanter's wand and his book of the words. One must find a way of being in this world while not being of it. A way of living in time without being completely swallowed up in time."

Without realizing it fully, my business this past decade, this late in life, has been to wake up. I don't want to live outside the world—I've spent a virtual lifetime doing that. I want to live inside the world as the person I am now . . . and now . . . and now.

Huxley died on November 22nd, 1963, a few hours after the fatal shots rang out in Dallas that killed President John F. Kennedy.

Like most everyone alive then, I attended to one of these deaths and not the other. I would have been far better off if I had known enough about Huxley to attend to his death, and enough about Kennedy not to attend to his. My job now includes knowing whose lives, and deaths, to attend to.