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*The following speech was prepared for the book launch of 'Enter'. Paul being absent, the speech was read by **Penny Busetto**. You can read a report of the book launch [here](#). You can view Penny's reading [here](#). You can gain a sense of the presentations seen as a whole [here](#).*

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Entering the Void

Paul Ashton

My apologies to Hennie for not being here personally to give this short input. Although Cornwall is a long way away my soul is with you tonight.

As I thought about Hennie's request that I talk about the Void, a pet interest of mine (from a psychological perspective), I realised that his book and my interest overlap hugely. When I refer to "The Void" I mean a number of different things that are covered in his deep and yet accessible book.

Many of us live in a state of disconnection from our whole selves. This has been referred to as "loss of soul" and it is, at one level, the main thrust of *Enter*. The question arises, how can we get to know those parts that have been denied or neglected and are thus unknown to us, when we are not conscious of them? That state of unconsciousness can be referred to as "living in the Void" as we are void or empty of our whole selves. Often we are reasonably comfortable with that state. We shut out from our awareness parts of ourselves that we do not like and it is only those who know us intimately who are conscious of our lack of authenticity and who, irritatingly, remind us of that lack.

As we begin working on increasing our awareness of what has previously been unconscious, we *Enter* what the mystic, Saint John of the Cross, referred to as "the dark night of the soul". This is another void experience brought about by becoming conscious of what we initially judge as negative aspects of our personality. With horror we realise that "this too is me" and we do not want to know that, it disturbs our smug sense of being what Hennie calls "nice". Despite all the deodorants in the world we begin to stink to ourselves.

Luckily matters do not rest there; with delight we may come to know, sometimes for the first time but often as a recollection, about positive aspects of ourselves, our creativity perhaps, our playfulness, or our ability to deeply love. We also realise that "being authentic" does not imply a necessary acting out of our "negative" aspects. What it requires is that we become aware that "this too is me". We may use our anger, for example, normally thought of as negative, as a source of energy in the service of self-assertion, standing up for what we believe. And in fact just being

conscious of our capacity for rage makes it less likely that that rage will unexpectedly surface and damage someone we love.

As we take on, i.e. become aware of, previously unknown aspects of ourselves, both negative and positive (yes, positives too), our personality (that sense of who I am) expands and feels more solid, more certain. We are able to differentiate received criticism, for example, as sometimes being, at least partly, a projection from the criticiser rather than being always true of ourselves and that ability to differentiate what is ours from what is theirs leads to an increased sense of solidity. As one of my clients put it "I used to feel like one of those silhouettes on a toilet door, now I feel three-dimensional."

The "entering" required to do this honestly implies working hard, being honest, being courageous and not falling asleep on the job ... except to dream, which, as Hennie suggests, requires yet more work. (Those four qualities, being awake, working hard and being honest and courageous, were defined by the alchemists of old as being necessary for "The Work". That "Work" was imagined as attempting to turn a base metal such as lead into gold but CG Jung understood the alchemists endeavours as symbolic of the sort of work that Hennie has been engaged in ... becoming conscious of his true self. And I would say that in his book he has demonstrated, probably unknowingly, how he has used those qualities.)

But back to the void. In the first manifestation of the void described above, the image could be one of deadness, something missing, and this is often visible or intuited by those around one. As a subject one may be darkly unaware, except for a vague unease or "not-me" outbursts, that there is anything amiss, anything lacking.

In the next manifestation the image is of falling into darkness. In some of his late poems DH Lawrence describes this as "falling from the hands of the living God" and it is into "oblivion". In other language we could call that falling from the known to the unknown and black is its colour. We start by thinking that we know who we are but what we "know" is only the surface and there is much more to us than just that. As we plumb the depths we initially feel frightened, "who is this person" we may ask ... it feels as though we have been taken over by some unpleasant demon and we wish we could go back to who we were.

But THEN ... we start to feel alive. Hennie describes this shift well. As what has been discovered about oneself (good and bad) comes to be known and accepted and one realises that one still has a choice about how to behave, one's personality seems to expand. Not that one becomes inflated, although that is a risk, but that there is simply more of one. The sense of the black void, the

emptiness and meaninglessness, the interminable falling, the oblivion, all disappear and life pulses through one. It is at this point that what could be called “the White Void” may supervene. This is the space in which paradox dances, the space celebrated by Niels Bohr in the quotation Hennie referenced in note 65. “How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress.” Suddenly one knows about inclusivity, both this and that (even if contradictory) may be true. I can have malevolent thoughts and act benevolently, I can be beautiful and ugly at the same time, I am not diminished by anything I discover about myself, and, most importantly, I am comfortable with mystery.

It strikes me that when “the clouds of unknowing” (described as such by “the English Mystic” who wrote about 500AD), are pierced by the white light of acceptance (remember that white light is a blend of all the colours of the rainbow whereas darkness presupposes an absence of light) you have experienced God or what we call “the god-image within”, that which Jungians term the Self. And that is what alchemists called “the work”, Dante saw as the end of Purgatory and the beginning of Paradiso, and the English Mystic referred to as the movement from being “Singular” (one’s own self) to being “Perfect”. This last idea of perfection suggests a pinnacle of purity which is clearly impossible to reach authentically. In Jungian thought the work is toward embracing all aspects of oneself; to become “whole” rather than “perfect”.

Hennie’s book describes that process.