

AMAZING GRACE

My first contact with Subud could not have been more off-putting. I was a young man at the time when I read the headlines in a national tabloid: “Ranting, Raving and Shouting...And They Say It Brings Them Closer To God” was the gist of what I read! I was reading all sorts of spiritual and psychological stuff at the time but this I could not stomach. “Is there no end to the stupidity of adults?” I thought as I concluded that this Subud was obviously some sort of worked-up, contrived pseudo- psychodrama. Certainly not for me then?!

Outer Events Begin To Lead the Way

Over a decade later and ... I am now married, with two children and a professional career, living in a beautiful rural part of Suffolk. There seems little to distinguish this day from hundreds of others. I am standing in a familiar market, surrounded by bags of shopping, parked here while my wife rushes off to get the last bits. In my boredom, I look around at the stalls and the crowds and I see something I have not seen here before on my many visits: it’s an irresistible magnet to me. A second- hand bookstall!

So, looking like a supermarket advert, with all these bags, I struggle over to have a look. Almost the first book I see is “Concerning Subud” by John Bennett, a book I had read some years ago when I was reading anything and everything. I remembered it as an enjoyable read, so thought I would get it for when I had “nothing better” to read. I ask: “How much is this?” No-body had bothered to put a price in it. “20p” came the reply.

What a successful day’s shopping this had, surprisingly, turned out to be!

I took the book home, put it on my bookshelf...and did not read it. Now at this time I was living next to a very good friend of mine and we used to occasionally go into each other’s houses for a coffee and a chat. On one of these occasions, whilst I was making the coffee, he spotted the book and asked if he could borrow it. Next time we met up he began talking about it and I soon realised I had forgotten most of what it was about. So, months after buying it, I re-read it.

Well, this time I was totally unprepared for my reaction: I remember thinking: “This Subud sounds like a beautiful flower in God’s garden!” How refreshing to read that this Subud was all about experience, not belief. It was not another religion standing apart from other groups. In fact, one could not only belong to Subud and another religion, it was directly stated that the experience of Subud could help one to understand one’s own religion better from **FIRST-HAND**

experience. The whole emphasis was clearly on one's own direct experience, not on dogma, statements of belief or anything like that. Clearly, there were enough of all these things in the world. Subud was offering a means to experience the **FUNDAMENTALS** of life for oneself. And more than this there was also the really exciting and hopeful news that Subud had come at this time, not just because modern people wanted proof from personal experience, but also because it could also actually help the world at this particularly dangerous time—modern warfare could destroy the world in ways too horrendous to imagine. In fact, it was possible that Subud was nothing short of a last chance for us! What an exciting possibility. Let's try anything, I thought. Anything that just might help these oh so troubled times...

And yet, still, at this time, I had no intention of joining Subud or any organisation. I had visited a number of groups (what a mixed bag they were!) and had concluded that whilst I might enjoy a few friends connected with them, I could not commit myself to any one way. I had concluded I was a “non-joiner. However, I did like the idea that Subud was not a new religion but could be in all of them and could even be open to those with no religious faith (this seemed especially important in an increasingly secular world).

I saw from my second-hand book that it had been published over 20 years ago. I wondered if Subud was still around or whether, like so many other 60's groups, it had shone brightly for an exciting but short time, promising so much and then disappearing just as quickly without trace. It was then that fate seemed to take another surprising hand in the game.

Suddenly, in the months that followed Subud seemed to be mentioned just about everywhere I went. More second-hand books turned up in a way that they hadn't before. I especially liked van Hien's “What Is Subud?” I particularly remember being early for a bus connection in Dartford and as I often did when I had minutes to spare I went to check out the local library. The first book I saw was Jacob Needleham's “The New Religions” which has an excellent chapter on Subud. Then there was Lawrence Barter's “Towards Subud”...Anyway all this had the effect of keeping Subud in my mind so that, in the end, I found an address in one of the old books (“Cricklewood Lane”) and wrote off for more information. Certainly I was not asking to join... I just wanted to see if it was still around!

Eventually, I got a reply. Cricklewood Lane had ceased to be a Subud address a long time ago but my letter had been forwarded so that I was told that my nearest group was about 1 ½ hours drive away in Norwich. Actually, that turned out to be untrue....The Norwich group told me that there was, in fact, a member in Ipswich, which was nearer to me. It turned out there was a little group

meeting every week in Ipswich and that was to be my first point of contact...eventually. Norwich also sent me a most off-putting little book called "The Basis And Aim Of Subud" which was ½ Indonesian and ½ English. The latter was as incomprehensible to me as the Indonesian! Strangely enough when I later contacted Ipswich group they, too, sent me another copy of this obscure little book. Obviously a quirky lot, I thought. I was in no rush to travel down to Ipswich. I guess I had long ago lost any exciting expectations of what any group might do for me. But then something else happened that was going to force Subud onto my attention in a most peculiar way.

Now Some Inner Experiences Begin

Every time I now thought of Subud (or even just seeing the word) I experienced a fresh, clean smell of bathroom soap! And I felt refreshed and inwardly clean! This happened so often that, once again, it intrigued me. So much so that, in the end, I did write off to arrange a meeting with the Ipswich folk...

Little did I think on that first 50 minute journey through the dark and winding lanes of Suffolk that I would be doing this journey twice a week in all weathers- and that the journey would fly by! As it was, my first trip to see the Ipswich group gave me nothing more than mild feelings of anticipation. When I arrived, I was surprised to see that the group consisted that night of two men! There were no women. I was soon to learn that Subud was quite keen to keep the sexes separate- was that because its founder was a Muslim? Possibly. This surprised me at the time. I had expected something that was supposed to have come for "modern times" to be closer to modern thinking (at least in the West) than that. Anyway, at the moment I was simply checking things out...More than anything, I was impressed at the time by the fact that these two men found this Subud so important to them that they came to its meetings week in and week out and had done so for YEARS. Often it was just the two of them- sometimes three.

I wondered what the pulling power of this Subud was on this little group? It wasn't long before I was given a little idea- I was at that time a shy, rather quiet person, especially with strangers. Usually it took me a long time to feel comfortable with people. That was not so on this occasion. As soon as I stepped into the narrow, timber-framed, low-ceilinged room I felt both confident and at home. I don't now remember what the conversation was about but I do remember it was surprisingly easy. However the real surprise was still to come...

It happened as soon as I drove away from the hall at the end of the meeting. Before I even got out of the car park this strange singing occurred to me!

Suddenly my feelings seemed to soar and I sang this unrecognisable song. I knew the tune. It was “Amazing Grace” (not one I was given to singing but certainly a favourite of mine when other people sang it.) The really strange thing about it all was the words: they sounded foreign: they sounded like “Mane, Mane” sung over and over again to this tune of “Amazing Grace”!!! I remember wondering to myself at one point if I was singing about “Money, Money”...And yet this singing made me feel so exuberant: happy and expansive. Soon I wanted the whole world to join in and to share the inexplicable happiness I was feeling- it really bothered me that I could not share this feeling with the whole world! Wow! What on earth was going on? After awhile, the singing stopped and I was aware then of a change in my breathing. Inexplicably, it became deeper and deeper; it acquired a slower rhythm than usual. Again, this felt very good, very liberating. Then the breathing changed again and it seemed to become more and more rapid. This alarmed me so I thought I had better bring the experience to an end which I did immediately.

By this time my 50 minute journey was almost over. For the last part of my ride in the car (yes, I was driving!) I tried to make sense of what had just happened. Later I was to find an amazing connection for my experience which was to excite me no end. For the moment, I simply concluded that I had had a Subud experience first-hand: it had made me feel very happy, full of well-being. Nothing quite so strange had ever happened so dramatically to me before! Yet, it did not stop me functioning in the world- I carried on driving, probably better than usual because the experience made me more alert, more awake. When I wanted it to stop it did so immediately. This I see as a very important aspect of the Subud experience: whatever dramatic thing may happen one is never entranced or controlled against one’s will in any way. There is no violation of the person; more an extension, a changing and a “flowering,” in fact.

The days that followed this experience were extremely interesting. I did not feel anxious about meeting the group again. My interest was mainly on the inner experiences that were just beginning for me. At this stage I had no idea where they were going to lead. Then, one afternoon, I came across what one Subud book called “probably one of the oldest prayers known to man: Om MANE Padme Hum.” I felt sure this “Mane” was my mystery word! Certainly I had been singing it in a worshipful, prayerful way (well, I thought so!) and I learnt that this prayer was in fact used as a mantra and I had certainly sung it over and over like one! Amazing!

But guess what? There was yet more to come...

I Make Two “Deals” With This Subud - With Surprising Results!

After this experience I began to wonder seriously if I should apply to become a Subud member. The procedure was simple: I just had to ask to join and then wait 3 months during which time one was encouraged to find out as much about Subud, and to meet as many Subud folk, as possible before taking the plunge. All very sensible, it seemed to me, but I still could not do this without a lot of thought. There were still “indications” being given to me so that I could not leave the decision alone for long. I was, and still am, very critical of intuitions or inner feelings whether they are “dramatic” or not. It was here that I discovered that I could find some good guidance by doing something of a “deal” with these inner experiences. This was going to stand me in good stead over the coming years, as I hope will become clear later. Anyway, in my desperation for guidance, I simply stumbled into it. “If Subud was truly a good thing,” I thought rather simplistically as I now realise, “then it will benefit someone else, not just myself!” This seems a strange idea of mine now but I have to say it worked...again, in a dramatic and surprising way.

Here goes...

A day or two after having these thoughts, I had a phone call from a friend. Alas, she was having an horrendous time of it. All I could do was listen because I had no answers. I DID NOT mention Subud; I did not even think of it. Then came something akin to a minor miracle. A week later my friend rang again. “You know, John,” she said EXCITEDLY, “since I rang you last week I have had going round and round in my head LIKE A MANTRA (her WORDS not mine!!) the song “Amazing Grace,” do you know it? IT HAS KEPT ME SANE THIS WEEK.” And then she went on to recount the true extent of her troubles. Suffice to say that she had feared for her sanity and believed she had been dramatically and beautifully helped by the hymn “sung like a mantra.”

For me this was amazing stuff. Still I did not know how to handle it. Surprisingly, perhaps, I kept all this to myself, feeling sure that if I told anyone they would not believe me and might think me mad (are you tempted?!) Anyway, I still did nothing about it- except think. By now I was sure Subud was “a good thing” and, obviously, it was, in answer to my first question, still very much alive. In fact, it had clearly shown me something of its inner reality. Yet, I still could not just join it! I don’t really know why. Perhaps the idea of travelling over 100 miles a week was too off-putting. Anyway, I set up another “test.” This was one that I felt sure would be highly unlikely to be positive. This time I thought to myself: “If we had a new car, yes, I would join this strange group.”

Now I felt confident that for this to come about something highly unlikely was going to have to happen because my wife and I had only recently been

discussing- at length- what to do with the money she was now getting for her new job. We had most definitely agreed NOT to get a new car! With that, as I thought, finally dismissed, there in the kitchen, stood my wife, saying quite surprisingly now: "I think we SHOULD get a new car!" With our "definite agreement" now a disagreement, I simply said: "Well, if we get a new car I think I'll give this Subud a try. It will mean my going to Ipswich two nights a week." A simple "O.K." followed. There was to be no going back now.