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An Underground Epiphany

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You have heard two sweeping, excellent papers on epiphany. In contrast, I will deal with a single quite ordinary and apparently unimportant event which, however, had a profound effect on the lives of my family and myself, ending with us moving to America.

John gave us Bishop Marianne Budde's clear definition of epiphany, which I repeat in verse;

In a flash, an insight getting through,
Happens to ev'ryone, me and you.
A Burning Bush, illuminating by its shine
A new pathway, for rest of our time.

Why verse? According to Oscar Wilde
Who assures us with greatest of pride
The Irish, rhyming verse invented
My writing is thus oriented.

The Underground in my poem, is not quite the fearsome Dante one, so vividly described by Bill.

It's the "Tube".

London's Underground, a busy place,
Trains often crammed....only standing space
Convenient, inexpensive....it's fast
Over 300 stationsIt's vast

Began long ago....140 years old,
Oldest in the world....so I'm told.
Two million souls use it ev'ry day.
Route-signs are clear, you can't go astray.

T'was the mid-sixties, working at Guys.
Medical school, with slight G.P. ties.
Health Service then had G.P.s too few

Guys, they believed this not to be true.

Their curriculum filled with all things new

I, a G.P. taught students, a few.

My practice, nearly two hours to reach,

Far too distant a site, where to teach.

Each day worked to develop a scheme,

To teach all students at Guys....a dream.

A G.P. course....Guys not intr'ested,

Curriculum otherwise vested

In "Tube", standing, eyes shut, going home,

My thoughts just on one problem alone.

Train slowed, opened eyes, moved t'wards the door

Glanced down, newspaper, crumpled on floor.

"Eureka!"

I'd found an answer in my quick scan,
Headline announced, London's "New Town Plan".

New set of ideas soon evolved,
This could mean that my problem was solved.

What's going on, I'll try to explain,
An epiphany on underground train.
Word Epiphany, spelt with large E,
Holy Feast Day in January.

Word epiphany, spelt with small e,
Manifestation revealed to me.
Beckoning new path, tempting new start,
Un-trodden, unknown....the risky part.

Who held the key to open the door?
Someone strong at Health Service core
Would give it a try, start at the top

If no support there, then it would flop

Sir George Godber, chief and an icon,

His leadership was a bright beacon.

In health matters always fair and just,

Once helped me starting the Migraine Trust.

Made appointment without much hassle,

“Tube” to “Elephant and Castle”Elephant and Castle?

“Infanta de Castille”, princess of Spain,

Was a match for Prince Charles in James’ reign.

Did not work out, the princess escapes,

Back to Spain, the sad Infanta trapes.

Became Queen of Hungary instead.

Poor Charles became King....then lost his head.

“Infanta de Castille”, foreign, too strange,

“Elephant and Castle”, good name exchange.

Not rush hour, got seated, soon was there.

Hoped was ready, no time to prepare.

So much depended on Sir George’s view,

How he’d receive plan, I had no clue.

Short walk from station, to my surprise,

Health Service headquarters, small in size.

Entered the lift, pressed the top-floor stop,

Sir George’s office, right at the top.

Antique furnishings, quite picturesque

The great man impressive, seated at desk.

Gold rimmed monocle in right eye

Lost the other, I did not know why.

Looked fierce, sun glinting on glass eye-piece,

My rapid heart beating would not cease.

Motioned t'wards two Chippendale chairs,
Seemed now relaxed, putting on no airs.
Even quite int'rested, let me talk,
Laid out plan on blackboard with chalk.

Sixty thousand people would live there,
30 G.Ps. providing their care.
With much to gain, Guys had no quarrels,
Hoping they'd get all the referrals.

Then Sir George asked, came quick to the point,
"Does Guys agree the plan would be joint?
You know Guys, they're pretty hide-bound."
"Guys will agree if you think plan sound."

So was annointed Thamesmead's health chief,
In one meeting, beyond my belief.

Also became a New Town planner
Learning much, of all sorts of manner

Those early days were heady and fun
First phase ended, health clinic begun
Things moving ahead, all going fine
Not a cloud in the sky, just sunshine.

Then, a recession's ugly head loomed
New research, like mine, could well be doomed.

I could not believe this to be true,
This sudden bolt out of the blue.

And what about my epiphany?
Was this just my Celtic fantasy?
I must say I was filled with despair.
Then someone mailed a letter by air.

To London's Medical Society
Who then passed on this letter to me
University seeking G.P.
Society thought this G.P. me.

The job offer suited me to a tee.
Would send person to interview me.
Chapel Hill, medical school very strong,
Guys position weak.... could not go wrong.

Uprooting, always at some cost,
Pondered wondrous lines by Robert Frost.

"Somewhere, ages and ages hence
Two roads diverged in a wood and I,
I took the road less travelled by
And that has made all the difference"

To move to the States, sounded fantastic
For my fam'ly, might be too drastic.
We came, exposed to Chapel Hill's charm,
Couple of years there would do no harm.

New system of care, had much to learn,
Often felt like a freshman intern.
Fam'ly Med'cine's nature's inclusive
This to some seemed too intrusive.

Made some mistakes and trod on some toes
Made many friends, as well as some foes.
Began to see Fam'ly Med'cine grow,
And then to see our graduates flow.

The South, wonderful in many ways,
But, not where to spend the rest of our days.
Fam'ly Med'cine course takes seven years.

First group graduated, time to change gears.

Chairmen now sought, but not many found.

Restless, I began looking around.

In London, job there waited for me.

Went.... made personal discovery.

I'd changed, I did not fit in their plan,

My ideas....too American!

Nothing I saw of int'rest to me

Then came letter from Cincinnati.

Some letters attract and some repel,

Especially when authors can't spell.

However, an exception for me,

"Program" spelled with two "ms" and an "e".

This could only mean letter was writ,

By well-spelling, educated Brit.
From Alistair Connell at U.C.
Search Committee would like to meet me.

Cincinnati, we liked what we saw,
Schools, music, art, plays, all a big draw.
Met Charles Aring, doyen of the Club,
The Queen City's literary hub.

When I first entered this wondrous hall,
Saw golden Shakespeare quote on this wall,
The setting....Literary Gloriana.
Victorian....Americana.

Elected in year seventy nine,
Thirty four years of meetings sublime.
Papers, suppers, rich conversation
Superb continual education.

In Baltimore, next week congregate,
One thousand teachers from every State.
To update their Fam'ly Med'cine skills,
To improve how to treat so many ills.

Where does U.S. Fam'ly Med'cine stand?
I believe it's reached its Promised Land.
Next week's meeting, I noted with glee
Session, "Prose reading and Poetry".

William Carlos Williams M.D., a G.P., loved doing house calls. He lived in Rutherford New Jersey, practicing from his home. He wrote his poetry between seeing patients. He rejected the elegant poetry of romanticists like Keats that first attracted him in his schoolboy days. He wanted his poetry to be new, to make it American. He used the material that surrounded him, the pain and suffering of his patients, the joy of birth and his own fulfillment as a doctor. He wrote "Do not expect to read the news in poetry....however, it can help to dilute human misery,

nourish the imagination and love”. He won a Pulitzer Prize and became the nation’s Poet Laureate. He is considered the greatest literary doctor since Chekov. He died, aged 81, in 1963. He is my hero.

He has taught doctors how the world of poetry can reach into the inner depths of feeling, areas that may be otherwise impenetrable by scientific medical data. As we heard in the conclusion of Bill Burleigh’s paper that, in his greatest work, the poet Dante came to believe that “love encompassed all things, the force he found as the answer to the deepest questions of life and the deepest needs of the heart”. A belief, echoed by Williams, in more modest terms.

A crumpled scrap of newspaper.... a Burning Bush?....an epiphany?.... an otherworldly event? I can understand why many think that I might be overstating the matter.

On this, let me give you some final thoughts.

They are partially based on a paper generously given to me by one of my guests tonight, Professor Sarason of H.U.C.

Unashamedly to support my sentiments, I have borrowed from his paper:

Many in this modern world of the physical and human sciences have banished the need for unproven speculation from their

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lives. Coincidences are only coincidences. Burning Bushes only burn.

And yet, and yet, many yearn for transcendence, to identify with something unworldly, larger than one's self and seemingly beyond scientific reasoning. Something of this nature, I believe, touched me, one evening in a London Underground train.

A glance at a piece of crumpled newspaper....an epiphany.

And so, now ends our papers three,

Each presenting an epiphany.

A companion on my Odyssey,

The love of my life, named Myfanwy.

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