

## **01 Introduction with the Humanist Desiderius Erasmus, the Historian of Religion Elaine Pagels, and Musician Nick Cave**

Desiderius Erasmus was born in Holland in 1466. After a strict Catholic upbringing he travelled widely in Europe, becoming one of the most influential thinkers of his time.

I came across Erasmus in Sarah Bakewell's book "Humanly Possible: Seven hundred years of humanist freethinking, enquiry and hope".

In the book I learned that Erasmus was an advocate of peace and friendship and wrote on many things including the benefits of education, literature, and study, as well as on manners and civilised behaviour. Amusingly he even gave advice on how to break wind with an easy relaxed look when in the company of others.

More seriously Sarah Bakewell writes:

"Erasmus also taught the habits needed for a fulfilling intellectual life, and here **the key thing is to have a richly stocked mind with as large a frame of reference as possible**. This will bring better judgement and an ability to express yourself with understanding as well as elegance. He recommends reading good books and following a popular technique of the time: keeping notes grouped by subject, so you can remember what you read and combine it with other ideas in useful ways. If no paper is to hand, you can paint notes on a wall, or even scratch them into window glass. The important thing is to build up a treasure house – the literal meaning of 'thesaurus' – in your mind, so it is always there as a resource."

Bakewell, Sarah. Humanly Possible (p. 145). Random House. Kindle Edition.

Books were essential to Erasmus. He travelled extensively, never staying in one place for a long period of time but said "My home is wherever I keep my library".

My own teacher, Sangharakshita, drew on an extensive library of reading on history, art and literature for his talks and writings on Buddhism.

During the second world war, when he was seventeen years old, he returned home for Sunday lunch to find his father sitting outside the rubble of their home in London, destroyed by a flying bomb. Despite the danger from the smoking wreckage, he clambered through the ruins, trying to discover how many of his 1000 books had survived.

(Nagabodhi “Sangharakshita: The Boy, The Monk, The Man” p.15)

Reading a wide range of books, both fiction and non-fiction, but especially non-fiction, has been a key part of my emotional, intellectual, and spiritual life, for as long as I can remember.

My treasure house exists in my physical library of books, in my Kindle, and on my computer where I keep an extensive set of articles, reviews, and essays on a variety of subjects, all grouped by topic in files and folders.

Although Buddhism is my over-riding spiritual interest, I don't just collect Buddhist books and articles. And I don't just collect materials that I think will be directly useful to my life as a Buddhist teacher, or that are relevant to topics I am already taking an interest in. Anything that gives deep pleasure, or food for thought, can find its way into the treasure house.

To start this series on ‘Building a Treasure House’, I've chosen to talk about two apparently very different people, Elaine Pagels, religious historian, and Nick Cave, musician. What do they have in common? What connects Elaine Pagels, an American born in 1943, with Nick Cave, an Australian born in 1957?

As we shall see, there's a musical connection, and they were both rebels. But the link that caught my attention, is that both Elaine Pagels and Nick Cave are engaged in a deep spiritual search for meaning in life, born of terrible personal suffering.

Let's take a closer look at each of them, starting with Elaine Pagels and her memoir “Why Religion? A Personal Story”.

Rebellion happened early in life for Elaine Pagels when, at the age of fifteen she horrified her strictly non-religious parents by becoming an evangelical Christian after attending a Billy Graham rally in San Francisco.

However, this phase lasted only a few years. When her close friend Paul was killed in a car crash, she was dismayed to hear her evangelical friends condemn him to hell because he was Jewish. She left the church and never went back.

Amongst the friends who survived the car crash was her musician friend Jerry Garcia who later founded one of America's most well-known rock bands, The Grateful Dead.

Sharing a flat with Jerry Garcia and other friends in San Francisco, what bound them together was the ‘intense powerful music’ they shared along with the huge questions Paul’s death had opened up for them all. “Where do the dead go? And how to go on living, alert to death’s presence, its inevitability?”

Later in her life these questions would return with unimaginable force after a terrible double tragedy.

But, first, she found her way to Harvard to study religion.

Although she had left Christianity questions persisted. What did different religions offer? Could they offer just as compelling a vision as she had encountered in the Billy Graham rally? Why hadn’t religion died out, as many had predicted? She was longing for a larger life, as she put it “perhaps on a canvas even bigger than the universe”.

It was at Harvard that she became a scholar with a particular interest in what are known as ‘The Gnostic Gospels’, the title of her most well-known book. It was this book that introduced me to Elaine Pagels.

In 1945 52 papyrus texts, including gospels and other secret documents were discovered in the Egyptian desert. These ‘Gnostic Gospels’ were gospels written at the same time as the ‘New Testament’ but had been declared heretical and excluded from the orthodox Christian tradition.

Following “The Gnostic Gospels” she wrote other books on the subject including “Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas” where she updated her work and views of the gnostic gospels.

In an interview about “Beyond Belief” Elaine Pagels said:

“When I began work on my book on the Gospel of Thomas, “Beyond Belief”, I was struggling with the question of what I loved about Christian tradition and what I could not love. Writing the book helped clarify for me that what I could not love was the rigid dogma and the idea that Christianity was the only path to God. And what I loved was the power of the tradition to move us, and even transform us, spiritually. But I don’t think that this is true only of Christianity. A religious tradition contains forms and teachings that can lead people into the spiritual dimension of life. In today’s world, that capacity and that experience need to be affirmed.”

<https://tricycle.org/magazine/saved-history/>

But Elaine Pagels' personal life has been marked by two terrible family tragedies.

First, she and her husband Heinz Pagels, lost their six-and-a-half-year-old son Mark to an incurable disease. And then, torn apart with grief at her son's death, eighteen months later, her husband Heinz was killed in a mountaineering accident.

How to deal with such suffering?

After experiencing grief and anger and despair, eventually she found some consolation in the gnostic Gospel of Truth, supposedly a secret teaching given by Paul but probably written by Valentinus, a second century Egyptian poet and visionary.

She writes:

"I've come to love this poetic and moving story for the way it reframes the gospel narrative. Instead of seeing suffering as punishment, or somehow as "good for you," this author sees it rather as Buddhists do, as an essential element of human existence, yet one that may have the potential to break us open out of who we are. My own experience of the "nightmare"—the agony of feeling isolated, vulnerable, and terrified—has shown that only awareness of that sense of interconnection [with others] restores equanimity, even joy."

At the end of "Why Religion?" Elaine Pagels reflects on the value of the gnostic gospels and on her husband Heinz's crucial insight:

"What's found in the secret gospels, and throughout the process of exploring the history of religion, offers resources we're now beginning to appreciate. What also helped me was Heinz's insight and imagination, shaped by scientific inquiry, which often extends beyond personal suffering. Once ... when he saw me in anguish after we received our child's crushing diagnosis, he said something I often recall: "Everyone's life has something like this in it." Angry, I snapped back; "No, not this—not a child with a terminal illness!" "No," he said, "not this, but something like this." Much later, I came to realize how much truth there is in what he said. Even now, writing about what's so deeply personal, I'm aware that anything I say can speak to you only as it resonates through what you have experienced yourself; yet even within those limits, we may experience mutual recognition."

Elaine Pagels believes that 'invisible bonds' connect us all.

Turning now to Nick Cave, rockstar, songwriter and band leader, I don't need to say much about the musical link to Elaine Pagels and the Grateful Dead.

I can't say that I am a keen fan of Nick Cave's music, although his song "Rock of Gibraltar" is one of my favourites.

My first memory of Nick Cave is a scene from the Wim Wenders' film "Wings of Desire", made in Berlin two years before the collapse of the wall that divided the city.

Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds are playing in a club where Daniel, an immortal angel who chooses to become human, finds the woman he has fallen in love with.

Nor do I need to say much about Nick Cave as rebel. For much of his time as a famous musician he's been seen as a very anti-establishment rebel. Nowadays, though, he says, to be rebel is to be conservative and a churchgoer.

For him, there is something energizing about living outside the expectations of other people.

But it was the death of his 15 year old son, Arthur, that forced him to view the world in a completely different way.

In an interview with Freddie Sayers of UnHerd, Nick Cave said to begin with, after the death of Arthur, he was completely absorbed with his own hurt and despair, until letters from thousands of well-wishers forced him to look outside of himself. He said:

"I think that the death of my son, to some degree, completed me as a human being, and allowed me to turn around and see the world and see everyone in it as suffering individuals, as broken individuals, and understand the perilous nature of life and the value of life. That changed my outlook on things hugely — completely. To understand and respect people, all people."

<https://dailycaller.com/2023/04/12/nick-cave-church-conservative-faith-son-unherd-britain-freddie-sayers/>

Amongst the letters he received were many that asked questions alongside the telling of their own stories of suffering. This led to the creation of Nick Cave's weekly missive, The Red Hand Files. He explains:

"... I sensed that inside their questions was a need to speak about their own suffering so that another human being could acknowledge it. This

idea had a profound impact on me because I felt it pointed to a form of healing through the combined acts of telling and listening. Essentially, that became the basic premise for The Red Hand Files. For me, The Red Hand Files is not just about answering the question: it is primarily about listening to the question.”

(Cave, Nick; O'Hagan, Seán. Faith, Hope and Carnage. Canongate Books. Kindle Edition.)

He goes on:

“The Red Hand Files tell me, explicitly and repeatedly, that we all suffer. They tell me that suffering is the defining element of the human story. I know this to be true because I recognise myself in these letters – I have my own situation mirrored back at me, my own pain – and I also know that by engaging with these people, I get better. I think the benefits of the exchange are mutual. I certainly hope so. I try to present to the person who has asked the question the very best part of myself, because by being vulnerable and genuine these individuals are presenting the very best of themselves. I think the spirit of love exists within this exchange, in the same way as the spirit of love, the divine spirit, exists inside a live concert ...

Music as a form radiates love and makes things better. It is important to me that there is a practical and positive utility to music – that it improves matters. And so it is a similar thing to The Red Hand Files. They are at their best, like music, a sincere and loving exchange that goes some way towards mutual restoration. Both music and The Red Hand Files have been a saving force in my own life.”

(Cave, Nick; O'Hagan, Seán. Faith, Hope and Carnage. Canongate Books. Kindle Edition.)

The stories of Elaine Pagels and Nick Cave and their reflections on suffering, inevitably point me towards the story of Kisa Gomati and the Buddha.

In his first album made after the death of his son, Ghosteen, Nick Cave sang the story of Kisa Gotami in the final track ‘Hollywood’. I’m going to finish with his version of the story as sung on Ghosteen.

Kisa had a baby but the baby died  
Goes to the villagers says my baby's sick

Villagers shake their heads and say to her  
Better bury your baby in the forest quick

It's a long way to find peace of mind, peace of mind  
It's a long way to find peace of mind, peace of mind

Kisa went to the mountain and asked the Buddha  
My baby's sick! Buddha said, don't cry  
Go to each house and collect a mustard seed  
But only from a house where no one's died

Kisa went to each house in the village  
My baby's getting sicker, poor Kisa cried  
But Kisa never collected one mustard seed  
Because in every house someone had died

Kisa sat down in the old village square  
She hugged her baby and cried and cried  
She said everybody is always losing somebody  
Then walked into the forest and buried her child

Everybody's losing someone  
Everybody's losing someone  
It's a long way to find peace of mind, peace of mind  
It's a long way to find peace of mind, peace of mind  
And I'm just waiting now for my time to come  
And I'm just waiting now for peace to come  
For peace to come

(<https://www.nickcave.com/lyric/hollywood/>)

It's a sad story but one that has a positive outcome. After finally burying her child, the story tells us that Kisa Gotami became a nun, and followed the teachings of the Buddha, eventually gaining the peace of enlightenment.

Link to recording:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/lielnalznyg7kpyyvw2wh/01-English-only-Introduction-to-Building-A-Treasure-House.MP3?rlkey=wpdabhrowi2inrcwxgrdiuk3j&dl=0>