

Searching in Philosophy



Pages From My Life's Book (Part 2)
by Derek Prince

It's good to be with you again today. Today I will be sharing with you how my search took me away from Christianity as I knew it and into philosophy.

Let me go back to the beginning of my life. I was born in India, of British parents. My entire family background was military. I have never met a male relative in my family who was not an officer in the British Army. I am the only existing exception to that rule.

I was born during World War I in India. As soon as the war ended, my family sent me home to Britain for the benefit of my health and my education, and education was probably the major factor in my life for the next twenty years or so.

At the age of nine I was sent away to a boarding school and from nine to twenty-five I spent most of each year in various different types of boarding schools or colleges or universities.

At the age of thirteen I was successful in a competitive examination for boys of that age all over Britain, the cream of Britain's intellectual upper class, and I was admitted as a scholar to Eton College, Britain's oldest, largest, most expensive, most exclusive, and probably most snobbish boarding school for boys.

At the age of eighteen I was again successful in another examination and I was awarded a scholarship to King's College in the University of Cambridge. My main education was in the Classics.

I remember starting to learn Latin when I was nine years old and Greek when I was ten. By the age of thirteen I was expected to be able to write verse in both Latin and Greek.

My religious background was in the English state church, the Anglican Church. I really knew no other church. All during the years that I was at school, we were compelled to attend church once every weekday and twice on Sunday—that's eight times a week.

As I looked around the people in the church, I gradually became disillusioned. When I reached my teens I had the

typical teenage reaction of being critical, rebellious, mistrustful of authority and the older generation. One of the things in the Anglican Church that I always remember was that every Sunday morning we had to pray together a certain prayer and in this prayer we had to say, "Pardon us miserable offenders." Well, by the time I was about thirteen or fourteen years old, I would look around at those people saying, "Pardon us miserable offenders," and I would say to myself, "They surely are miserable." And then I thought to myself, "...and I'm an offender." There was no doubt in my mind about that. I knew I was doing all sorts of things I shouldn't be doing. But then I came to this conclusion: I could be an offender without religion and not nearly so miserable. So that was my secret determination.

Now, as long as I was at Eton I had no choice, I still had to go on going to chapel once every weekday and twice every Sunday. In my mind I came to this conclusion: Christianity is a harmless occupation for old ladies of both sexes!

Another way I described Christianity was: It is a crutch that weak-minded people use to hobble through life with. But I'm not weak-minded, I don't need the crutch, and I'm going to throw it away just as soon as I can.

Well, when I got to Cambridge University, church-going was no longer compulsory and I took that crutch of Christianity and I threw it away from me as far as I could throw it. But always inside me there was a gnawing realization that somewhere there must be a meaning and a purpose to life. Where could I look? Christianity, as I knew it, had failed to provide the answer. It must be somewhere. Where to look?

Well, I decided that philosophy had the answer so I became a student of philosophy. The philosophy that I studied most was that of Plato, who is undoubtedly one of the outstanding intellects of human history. I was able to read Plato in the original Greek and I've read every word that he ever wrote in that language—which is many, many words. I combined my study of ancient philosophy with various forms of modern philosophy.

The form of philosophy that was fashionable in those days was known as Logical Positivism. It really centered around finding the right meaning of words and its thesis was that if you really understood what words mean, you wouldn't bother about being a philosopher. It was a strange, mixed-up kind of occupation. I remember that we spent one whole term in the philosophy class at Cambridge discussing whether we could know that the desk that the professor was lecturing from was really there and, as a matter of fact, as far as I remember, we never did resolve that problem.

So philosophy, too, was somewhat confusing in a way. I was intellectually gifted—I have always been at home in the world of words—but when it comes to practical things like what makes a car go, I just don't bother with things like that. I just cultivate other people as friends who do know what makes a car go. But when it comes to abstractions and definitions and theories and all that, I've always been at home in that field. So I was very successful. I was always the most successful student at the university in my particular field. For two years I held the Senior University Research Studentship in Philosophy, which is a distinction that few people have ever enjoyed. I don't say this to boast, but I just want to indicate that it wasn't a lack of intellect that was the source of my frustration.

Finding that somehow philosophy really didn't seem to have a very clear or positive answer, I turned to Oriental cults and systems such as are extremely fashionable in our contemporary society. I was probably about one generation ahead of many of these people, though I didn't realize it. I turned to Yoga, to Theosophy, and even to Voodoo. When I look back, I either smile or laugh at my simplicity. I became for a while, to the best of my ability, a practicing yogi. I practiced meditational and positional yoga. But again, I ended up in disillusionment. I had a certain kind of supernatural experience but it didn't make me happy. In fact, it seemed to be followed by a kind of grey depression that settled around me.

My big problem was that I was in many ways an idealist. When I studied Plato, I could see his ideal picture of the ideal city, the ideal state, the ideal laws, the ideal government. And it really appealed to me. But always I came back to earth with a bump. I wasn't in the ideal. I was confronted with the actual. Not only in other people, but, worst of all, in myself. And the actual, both in other people and in myself, was so far from the ideal that it was intensely frustrating and I knew no way to bridge the gap between those two things: the ideal and the actual.

One result of all this was that I developed chronic indigestion. I was carefully examined in one of the best hospitals in Britain with all sorts of X-rays and other tests but there seemed to be no medically diagnosable cause for my indigestion and therefore no cure. I believe it was really an emotional reaction to this frustration that I experienced when I contemplated the ideal and saw how far away the actual was from the ideal.

The only kind of relief that I could discover from this pressure and this indigestion was to turn to whiskey. Whiskey had always been accepted as a drink in my parents' home. Nobody felt any reproach about whiskey. And I remember as a boy of sixteen I surreptitiously sneaked a little whiskey

when nobody was looking and put it in a glass and splashed some soda into it and drank it and felt about two inches taller immediately. But, by the time I'd reached my twenties, it took a bottle of whiskey to do the same for me that that little splash in a glass had done some years earlier.

And so, when I couldn't stand this tension any longer between the ideal and the actual, I would take a bottle of whiskey and a friend and we would listen to classical music and drink that whiskey. And when we'd finish one bottle, maybe we'd go on to the second. I had one particular friend who was very expert in the realm of music. In those days there were no hi-fi's and, in order to get the best reproduction, you had to have a curving nine foot horn attached to your gramophone or phonograph. So we'd sit there with this horn sticking out over our heads, giving out this glorious music and drinking our whiskey and looking at one another and wondering whether we had the solution to life or not.

Looking back, I could say this about this period in my life: I achieved academic success. I was one of the youngest persons ever to be elected to a Fellowship at King's College Cambridge. Those words probably don't mean much in the United States but in Britain that's a very high academic distinction. I became a kind of resident professor and a member of the governing body of my college. So, I had achieved success, I had a certain reputation, I had written a dissertation of Plato's method of definition and its evolution, I had a lot of long words and phrases, I'd tried a lot of different things but, looking back, I would have to say that personally, I was confused and frustrated, disappointed and disillusioned and I didn't know where to find the answer.

Well, our time is up for the day. I'll be back with you again tomorrow At this time. I'll continue to share with you my personal experiences in my search for truth. Tomorrow I'll be telling you about the dramatic impact of World War II on my life.

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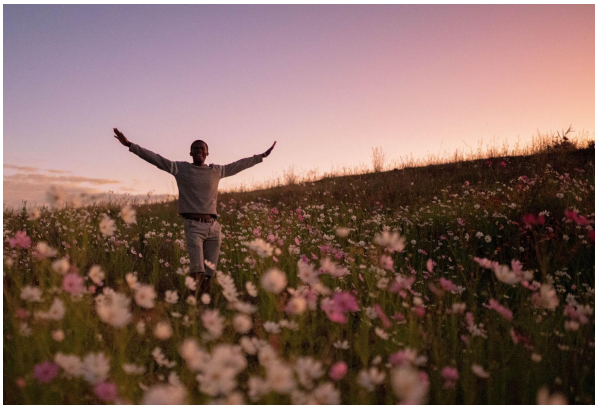

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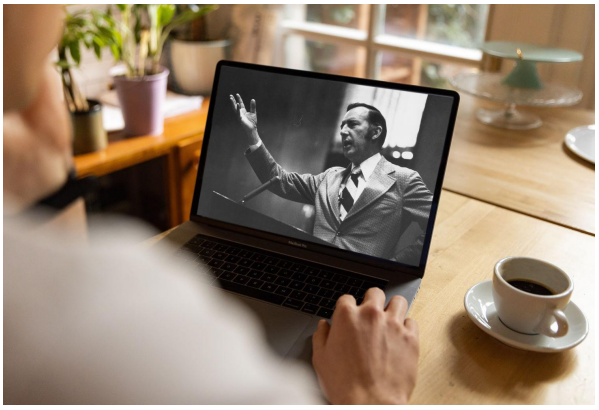

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