



GUY SPRUNG
CHAPTER ONE

For Father's Day, a review of Dad

When a son reads his father's work, how can he avoid the Charybdis of automatic rejection on the one hand and the Scylla of unquestioning acceptance on the other? Tomorrow is Father's Day, so I hope the conflict-of-interest police will forgive these somewhat personal ponderings.

As citizen of a culture that has no tradition of respect for age, and as a charter member of the 1960s generation whose self-identity was based on an assertive dismissal of our parents' values, my first reaction to my father's writings was, naturally, a (healthy?) disregard.

Though he had studied philosophy at university, when World War II broke out, he enlisted in the army and stayed on afterward as a career officer. "You have to be a philosopher to be a soldier," was his quip when asked how he combined the two. His first book was a collection of essays, *The Soldier in Our Time*, which examined the evolving philosophy of soldiering through history.

The last time I tried to flip through the pages of *Soldier* was many years ago; although the subject matter is unexpectedly arresting, the book seemed to me thin on actual research and subject to the slight patronizing tone of an officer looking down on his men. Not a book you will find in many libraries today, but writing it was an indication that Dad's focus had returned to his first love, the love of wisdom.

After Truth
Explorations in
Life Sense
By Mervyn
Sprung
State University
of New York
Press
189 pp, \$16.95

Before taking early retirement from the army, in an extraordinary feat of self-discipline for his age, he spent three years teaching himself Sanskrit. I remember as a teenager, peering into his study while he worked, night after night, hunched over huge dictionaries of Sanskrit hieroglyphics, his cackling budgerigar hopping around on his balding head.

After a stint of living in India on his own, he was able to study, in the original Sanskrit, the works of the Buddhist radical skeptics and in particular the writings of Nagarjuna. His translation of one of the seminal texts, *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), is a tome so formidable in its physical weight, thought processes and sentence structure that I have never actually been able to get beyond opening its covers. "He translates books from incomprehensible Sanskrit into incomprehensible English," was how I would answer anyone who asked what my father did.

Middle Way is, however, a book you will find in the scholarly libraries of the English-speaking world.

When he started teaching his own unique syllabus of comparative philosophy at university, he used his classes, in the manner of a classical philosopher, to temper his emerging ideas in the heat of his students' critical onslaught.

The result was his next book, *The Magic of Unknowing: an East-West Soliloquy* (Broadview Press, 1987), which imagines an encounter and a dialogue between the major figures in world philosophy, from Aristotle via Chuang Tzu to Wittgenstein.

For someone, like myself, who managed to avoid any serious studies in philosophy at university, it is an accessible and extremely cogent distillation of all the theories of the greats.

The Magic of Unknowing has been described to me by his colleagues as a brilliant little gem whose time will come. With the hubris of a renegade, Sprung Sr. resolves his phantasmagorical dialogue by having the Western philosophers accept the wisdom of the East that "reason has lost its singular power to establish truth and sense in the human world."

This thought is the natural stepping stone to his most recent book, *After Truth*, published last year. It was written, for the most part, in a rebuilt log cabin on the edge of the Canadian Shield, over the door of which he had affixed a sign in classical Greek: "In the beginning was the log-house" (Greek "logos" or "word").

After Truth is a remarkable exploration, in the form of a continuous soliloquy, of "some of the basic beliefs by which we orient ourselves in the world and survive there."

Time, Space, Words, Knowing, Person – each in a separate chapter – are made transparent to reveal how we actually live them in our day-to-day existence. "Knowing is not the privileged function of an upper-class faculty. It's the achievement of nothing less than a full person – body feelings, imagination, thought," whereas "Western science is a kind of knowing that implies a radically simpler notion of reality."

This is philosophy which draws on, contradicts, sparks off the theories and ideas of many of the world's great thinkers to develop its own extremely postmodern understanding of reality, which actually is trying to put magic and responsibility back into our existence.

After Truth is the most subjective, the most personal of all of Sprung Sr.'s writings, yet paradoxically I find I can engage in this meandering path of "vivial exploration" with a dispassion that belies my intimate relationship to the voice that is speaking. How did that happen?

Now, as I watch my 3-year-old son waddle down the hallway in his diapers, his little will growing daily as he exercises his right to defy me, I wonder how, if at all, he will perceive his father's engagement with reality.