

In the Beginning was the Log House

INTERVIEW

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By Guy Sprung

Guy Sprung is a veteran Québec theatre director, writer and actor, committed to theatre as the unique symbiosis of entertainment and social and political discourse. He retired from running Infinithéâtre in 2021, after 20 years developing, producing and brokering the work of Québec English-language playwrights



Εν αρχή ην ο Λογhouse (John 1:1), Glen Alda, Ontario – Photo © Guy Sprung, 2022

[*Serai* editor Kerry McElroy had the pleasure of interviewing Guy Sprung about his father, Mervyn Sprung, whose philosophical writings strike an evocative chord in our current era of extremes and hegemonized mindsets.]

as an integral contribution to the Projet Québécois.

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Kerry: You are the son of Canadian philosopher Mervyn Sprung. Can you give our readers a bit of overview about who he was?

Guy: Mervyn Sprung was a loner, a sceptic, an outlier in the Canadian philosophic world. In the 'sixties, as a professor at Brock University in St. Catherines, Ontario, he was an early proponent of comparative philosophy, crusading for the introduction of Eastern philosophy into the conservative, Anglo-centric world of Canadian academia. His objective was to unseat the hegemony Aristotelian logic held over mainstream Western thinking. His exploration of life sense, sourcing both Eastern and Western thinkers and thought, led to an original philosophic journey that he outlined in his final published writing, *After Truth, Explorations in Life Sense*.^[1]

Kerry: And what about as a person? His biographical details? Because as we will discuss further, it seems that some of his most central intellectual concepts may have emerged from life experiences. And he had a rather fascinating life in many ways. Can you talk about that?

Guy: A Winnipeg-born prairie boy, both his parents were from farming families, neither with much more than a grade-school education. His father was a lay deacon in the local Methodist church, and

if Mervyn was caught playing baseball on Sundays, he was given a thorough licking. His summers were spent labouring in the fields under the open prairie sky and canoeing on Lake of the Woods. In 1936 at the age of 23, despite not knowing a word of German, Mervyn Sprung won a Humboldt Stipendium, the German equivalent of a Rhodes Scholarship, to do a Ph.D. in Philosophy at the University of Berlin.

In August of 1939, he finished his thesis, sat his oral exam, and then, with hostilities imminent, boarded a train to London. When war broke out, he returned home to enlist in the Canadian Army. His acquired fluency in German ensured he was immediately seconded to the Intelligence Corps. First to the Brits, then to the Canucks. With the Canadian forces during the Italian campaign, he won a Military Cross for his bravery. In 1945, as a member of the victorious Allied forces, he entered Berlin, walked into the University and was awarded his Ph.D. Asked how he was able to combine philosophy with his profession as a soldier, he would answer, his seriousness camouflaged by a smile, "To be a soldier, you have to be a philosopher."

Before leaving the army, as a full Colonel, at the age of 52, he spent his evenings and late nights applying his unusual language abilities to learning Sanskrit. On

retiring, he lived like a monk for two years, attending Benares Hindu University in Varanasi, exploring the writings of the early Buddhist philosophers. He found his true epistemological home in the scepticism of Eastern philosophy, lead there via pathways laid down by Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. Mervyn Sprung's *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way*, a translation of the essential chapters of Nagarjuna's aphorisms, from second-century AD Sanskrit into English, is still, 40 years later, the translation of record and consulted by scholars around the world.

Mervyn Sprung and his wife Ilse retired to a pioneer homestead up the Ottawa Valley. She had "accosted" him –an Engländer (Englishman) – in the hallways of the University of Berlin, hoping their relationship might help her escape Nazi Germany. They were married in London one day before Chamberlain declared war on Hitler. Mervyn continued to engage with Eastern thought, working and writing in the homestead's restored 1879 settler log cabin. "In the beginning was the log house" was the hand-painted inscription in Greek over the entrance. Ironically this pun on the Greek "logos" actually contradicts the thinking he wrestled with inside the cabin. He passed, five days into the new millennium, in a hospital corridor in Peterborough. He had

struggled to pull out his own life-support systems, because, as he had stated repeatedly, he did not want to “go out a vegetable.”

His final writings include *The Magic of Unknowing: An East-West Soliloquy*, an imagined encounter between eight seminal classical thinkers of the East and West, brought together by Aristotle to discuss the gathering scepticism towards the foundational thesis of Western thought, that Reason is the sovereign human faculty. *After Truth, Explorations in Life Sense* was his final work, a search for the sense and worth of how we live our lives. The pun of the title is deliberate. His philosophic quest is to seek after Truth in a post-Truth intellectual era.

Kerry: How do you think, personally, your father’s life journey informed his philosophical ideas? Had you given that much thought, previously?

Guy: Action or work, not words, is the maxim you live by if you are a settler trying to cultivate the prairie and live off the land. This farmer’s scepticism of words was ingrained through his family into his being. Also, though he rejected the strict Protestant upbringing of his youth, I believe it nurtured a secular spirituality. Working summers in the fields under the open prairie sky (think W.O. Mitchell’s novel, *Who Has Seen the Wind*)

and inhaling the mystery of nature while canoeing on Lake of the Woods were the unworded, indelible influences on a unique mind impatient to transcend the accepted thinking of the world he grew up in. I also suspect there is a not-so-accidental irony that his prudish, orthodox Protestant, anti-sensual upbringing should engender a philosopher who trusts the senses to explore and secure human worth.

Kerry: So then we have an overview of his career – the stepping stones and credentials – and a sense of the life that got him there. Can you now explain to readers (most of whom are not philosophers!) some of the central concepts of his work?

Guy: His life journey through the forests of Eastern and Western philosophy led him, as it were, to the contemplative clearing that is *After Truth*, his final published work. Here, in separate chapters such as Inner and Outer; Space; Time; Words; Knowing; and Person, he explores in an unusual original soliloquy how we live these elements for their sense, not their meaning. Sense being open, and meaning being closed. And for their worth, not their truth.

In the chapter on Words, for instance, we find:

“Meaning is from a dictionary. Sense is from life. . . . The sense of words comes to one in the echo the words give as they resonate from the silent sounding board of understanding. Mostly it is the sounding board of . . . an infinitely complex personally shaped life sense by the grace of which each of us lives.”

In the chapter on Person we find:

“Sensing the presence of person in a friend or loved one is not like perceiving intelligence or anger or patience in them. . . . Sensing person is not a subjectobject event. It’s the unwilled, effortless response of one to an effortless, unwilled response in the other. And vice versa. . . . Neither wills it or is otherwise aware of it. It takes two and it is between two. . . . Person, so presencing, is like an undreamed-of truth, a fresh opening of vivial sense, a rare gem, the very substance of human being.”

Mervyn Sprung’s ability to understand, distill and discuss the touchstones of human thinking, East and West, is prodigious, as is his ability to integrate these touchstones into his own thinking. He wrote in the precise, muscular, Canuck prose of his contemporaries, Northrup Frye and Marshall McLuhan, eschewing academic bafflegab, or self-congratulatory orotund wordsmithery. The path through the dense forests of Eastern

and Western philosophy that he lays down in *After Truth* needs multiple, careful re-treading should a reader wish to join him in his contemplative clearing.

Kerry: How did you come to it? Does it connect with your own work and interests in life?

Guy: Over a career that spans 50 years, I have explored the world through theatre. I try and understand the meaning of words by embedding them in the mouths of specific theatre characters acting actions, in an illusory stage world.

Does this have any relationship to, or even origin in, Mervyn Sprung's exploration of life sense? Was there some philosophic quest bequeathed to me, unconsciously, unworded? In my auto-fictional-biographical short story (linked below), "Fathers and Sons," in the penultimate paragraph the Son asks the Father:

In your last attempt to use words to explore existence, your last published groping after truth, you talked about everyday inner and outer existence being a kind of "durable stage setting in which life is enacted." Your life quest was to transpire these everyday beliefs/illusions blocking/concealing our vision/understanding. You were

seeking to identify the underlying Thrall, the enabling presumption that accompanies and permeates all judgments of sense that arise within it. You used the word, “Mystery”, to adumbrate that which lies behind this everyday theatre-like construct we live in. A larger life? –A mystery human beings have a need to keep searching out/for? And words, feeble, bias–reaffirming, solipsistic and slippery as they are, are the imperfect tools of this search. But can words without acting and action have meaning? Here our beliefs, the beliefs of Father and Son are congruent.

Kerry: What is your current role and project in terms of working with your father’s lifelong philosophical output?

Guy: *After Truth* was published in 1994 by the State University of New York Press. As a work of Canadian epistemology, the edition was doomed to invisibility in the States by the lack of any supporting promotion. I am preparing a revised Canadian edition, in the hopes of reaching the wider attention this unique exploration deserves. I have a hunch it might have relevance in our Post-postmodern world.

Kerry: We are going to give our readers a link to the section “Traditions and Thrall” from *After Truth: Explorations in Life Sense*. Could you guide us into this excerpt?

Guy: To attempt to encapsulate *After Truth* in a brief paragraph is a self-defeating impossibility. Perhaps a selection of quotes from “Traditions and Thrall” – a section of the concluding chapter entitled Vivial Sense – will entice a reading of the full section linked below. This in turn might arouse interest in the full exploration of the book. Mervyn Sprung’s thoughts are italicized and in quotes; my comments are not.

“In India the orthodox Vedantists and the unorthodox Buddhists share the presumption of the behavioural nature of all vivial sense. And the falsity of abstract knowledge. Virtually the same for the Taoists. But the search for sense in classical Greece, which still persists among us, if tottering, stands on its head when put alongside classical Indian and Chinese thought, as this does put alongside Western thinking. Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, whatever their differences, are one in the presumption of the supremacy of the intellect... They take only one kind of sense seriously: a theory expressed in abstract concepts. Reason is captain of the human soul and the compass of all theory.”

The differing philosophic traditions result from differing foundational enabling presumptions that Mervyn Sprung terms “Thrall.” Thrall is the ultimate “explanation.” The spell or thrall of each tradition validates its own kind of sense of the way of things. It is non-rational, unacknowledged, and accompanies and permeates all judgments of sense that arise within it.

“For a Vedantist the oneness of the cosmic truth/being with one’s own being is not a presumption but the way one lives. For Descartes rationality as the substance of the human is just as much given.”

“Thrall would be mistaken as ideology, or superstition, or religious dogma, or philosophy. Thrall is what enables each of these to make sense—to those espousing them.”

“Yet, thralls aren’t forever. They lose their power and dissolve in time. They may encounter other, incompatible thralls equally powerful, each forcing the others to disclose themselves as what they have been all along. That’s what the classical thralls of two or three millennia are doing to each other right now. The Indians and Chinese are already more open than we, but the encounter is just beginning. We are at that time in the span of a thrall when the cultures dependent on it are in

decline, and vivial exploration, now aware of other traditions, is freed to penetrate to the roots of the breakdown. As a thrall is laboriously brought out into the light it must lose its power: to grasp a thrall as an ungrounded presumption is to destroy it. It's sure we're moving into a time when the Western enthrallment to theory–science now–is surfacing because life within that enthrallment is beginning to destroy itself.”

But Thrall is itself in some way contingent on, or born from, an “*ur-need,*” an “*eternal human need to give some deep sense to life, and of what may be beyond life.*” This *ur-need* is itself the subject of consideration elsewhere in the book.

Later in his final chapter, Mervyn Sprung introduces the terms “Source” and “Mystery,” which arrive, “*hinting that they have come from some other where and conceal more than they reveal.*” It is here that his exploration of vivial sense is touched by what I suspect is a secular spirituality. *After Truth* is a challenge. A challenge for us to feel a tree, to smell the spring rain, to see the worth of another human being with a different vivial sense than we do at the moment.

Kerry: The theme of this issue of *Montréal Serai* is “Out of the Ashes.” How does your father’s work connect with that concept? What might its relevance be for

readers of today, living through this moment? Can you choose another excerpt here that might answer this question, and discuss it a bit?

Guy (quoting Mervyn): *“Is truth as a faith, not endangered everywhere? ...It’s sure we’re moving into a time when the Western enthrallment to theory–science now–is surfacing because life within that enthrallment is beginning to destroy itself.”*

Unfortunately, 30 years after these words were written, we are already beyond the “beginning.” The primacy of the rational in Western thinking, the monopoly we have ceded to science to determine life sense and human value and to define how to live our lives has resulted in a world that will soon be reduced to ashes. A greater respect for a lived common sense, a vivial sense, might be a small contribution to realigning our behaviour towards a greater respect for this Mother Earth.

Mervyn Sprung might hesitate at the idea, but his search for the mystery of living, for new ways of living as a human, is a not-so-distant cousin to the Indigenous beliefs that what are seen as inanimate objects by many – waterfalls, canoes or trees – are, in a vivial sense, living entities, just as human beings are.

Kerry: Anything else you'd like to add, to close on what this work means to you or what you hope it can mean to readers?

Guy: It might be an idea to read my auto-fictional-biographical short story, "Fathers and Sons," as a kind of concordance to the chapter from *After Truth*.

Kerry: We thank you for sharing all of this with us, Guy.

Excerpts from Mervyn Sprung's piece and Guy Sprung's auto-fictional-biographical short story, "Fathers and Sons," are linked here:

["Traditions and Thrall"](#)

["Fathers and Sons"](#)

[1] *After Truth* was published in 1994 by the State University of New York.