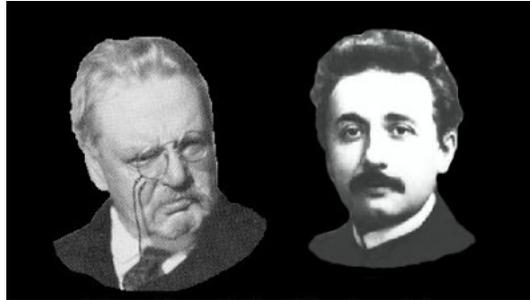


The Prince of Paradox and the Light-Beam Rider

Mike Cobb



While there is no indication that G.K Chesterton and Albert Einstein ever met, this is a story of what might have been if two great men of history, who shared a common respect for the power of awe and wonder, had crossed paths. It is also a contemplation of how their reverence for awe shaped who they were.

Gilbert Keith (G. K.) Chesterton

“The world will never starve for want of wonders; but only for want of wonder.” G. K. Chesterton

He leaned against the deck rail, cigar in hand, and watched the shoreline fade into the distance as the RMS *Adriatic* cast off from Pier 54. He took in the waves crashing against the wooden pylons and breathed the crisp salt air. He listened to the muffled rumbling of the quadruple expansion steam engines as the ship made its way to sea. The smoke from the engine’s twin stacks faded into the morning fog. Weighing in at almost twenty-five-thousand tons, with seven decks and a capacity of more than twenty-eight-hundred passengers, the *Adriatic* was not the largest ship at sea, but it was the last of the White Star Line’s Big Four ships. And it evoked a sense of awe in anyone who beheld its presence.

It would take almost five days to make the voyage from New York to Southampton. He had planned to spend much of that time preparing for a series of BBC radio talks, as many as forty a year, that he had reluctantly agreed to deliver, on topics ranging from architecture to philosophy to Kipling. He would also begin to gather his recollections and notes from the trip into what would become the book *Sidelights on New London and Newer York*, to be published the year after his return to England. The ship’s reading and writing room, with its sunlit floor-to-

ceiling windows, Chateau Beauvais armchairs and spacious mahogany writing tables, would provide the perfect setting to inspire creativity. When he was not there, he would probably be found engaging with fellow travelers and enjoying a Robusto in the nearby smoking lounge.

He was accompanied by Frances, his wife of almost twenty-nine years. It was rare that he would travel outside of England, whether to the Holy Land, continental Europe, Ireland or America, without her by his side. He recognized the gifts, both spiritual and practical, that she brought to their relationship. Not only was she his devoted wife; she was also his muse and best friend. He had once said, "I am not absentminded. It is the presence of mind that makes me unaware of everything else." But in reality he knew that, distracted as he was, she was the one he depended on to keep his path straight. Frances had not been well before the trip and a friend had urged her not to go, but she replied that her husband would be so lonely without her along. It would have been unthinkable for him to have traveled afar without her companionship.

This had been their second trip to America. For six months into the spring of 1931, accompanied by his secretary, Dorothy Collins, they had traversed the vast country by rail, from California and the great plains to Massachusetts and New York. At Holy Cross College in Worcester he was awarded an honorary doctorate, one of many that he would garner over the course of his career. While in New York City he had taken the opportunity to debate with lawyer and skeptic Clarence Darrow at Mecca Temple. The subject was "Will the World Return to Religion?". Critics said he held his own quite well. Most in attendance claimed that he had won the debate, showing a greater command of science than had his agnostic opponent.

As he stood on the deck that spring morning, his thoughts turned to another ship that had docked at Pier 54 nineteen years earlier, the *Carpathia*, carrying seven-hundred thunderstruck *Titanic* survivors. Prior to its sinking, the ill-fated ship had inspired awe—it was huge, it was luxurious, it was unsinkable. And then, two hours and forty minutes after hitting an iceberg in the Atlantic, it was gone.

Chesterton was a deeply religious man, a convert to the Catholic faith. A cornerstone of his spirituality was the conviction that the mete and proper response to the gift of humankind's existence was wonder, awe, and gratitude.

Upon landing in Southampton, he and Frances boarded the steam train via London to Top Meadow, their home in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire. They looked forward to a respite from travel before they would take the short trip west to Oxford the following May for a rendezvous with Lucian Oldershaw, who was married to Frances' sister.

Albert Einstein

“He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.” Albert Einstein

As G. K. Chesterton was making his way across America, Albert Einstein was visiting Cal Tech as a research fellow. There he and his wife, Elsa, spent time with Nobel laureate Robert Millikan and developed a friendship with Charlie Chaplin, borne in large part of their mutual dedication to pacifism. They would return to Europe only a few weeks before Gilbert and Frances. Although the two couples had been in the same parts of the country at the same time, their paths didn't cross.

Prior to the trip to America, he had received a telegram from Dr. Frederick Lindemann, esteemed professor of physics and a close friend of Winston Churchill. Lindemann had been hounding him for several years, without success, to return to Oxford after almost a decade to deliver a series of lectures. Einstein, who shunned publicity and attention, had flatly refused to consider such a request. Lindemann had gone so far as to visit him in Berlin and to try to persuade Elsa to change her husband's mind, writing to her in a letter that “He can of course have as many meals as he likes alone in his rooms and I will endeavor to preserve him as much as possible from importune invitations.” He finally relented and agreed to visit Oxford to give three lectures.

In early May 1931 he boarded a sleeper train at the Berlin Anhalter Bahnhof bound for Calais. His traveling companion was not Elsa. He was accompanied by Ethel Michanowski, a Berlin socialite with whom he had a *too close for comfort* relationship. He knew that, when Elsa found out that Ethel had traveled to Oxford with her husband she would be livid, but for the sake of their marriage she would choose to turn a blind eye to this as well as his other dalliances. When he and Ethel detrained at the Gare de Calais-Ville they lingered for a while to enjoy a glass of Bordeaux at a nearby café and savor the rich aroma of fresh-baked baguettes emanating from the boulangerie along the Avenue du Président Wilson. The ferry terminal was two-and-a-half kilometers away. They considered walking but opted to hail a taxi instead, given the amount of luggage they had brought along for the three-week trip. They took the ferry across the English Channel to Dover, where a boat train awaited them. From there they proceeded to Oxford, changing trains at London's Victoria Station. As he watched the station fade in the distance he was reminded of the train-and-platform Gedankenexperimente, or thought experiment, that he had postulated fourteen years earlier to describe what had come to be known as the relativity of

simultaneity. Given that its effects were accentuated by a moving object's speed, he was intrigued by the prospects of someday riding on the Schienenzeppelin, an experimental rail car resembling a Zeppelin airship that had been built in Hanover and was reported to travel at speeds as high as two-hundred-thirty kilometers per hour. But his dream was not to become reality, as the train was never put to commercial use for fear that it was unsafe.

Einstein was deep in thought when the train pulled into the Oxford railway station. He was brought back to the present when he looked out the window of the railcar to see Professor Lindemann awaiting him on the station platform. As he and Ethel descended the steps from the railcar he noted that the grin on Lindemann's face turned to a dour gaze at the realization that Ethel, and not Elsa, had accompanied him. The two men embraced. Lindemann's loyal manservant, James Harvey, drove the three of them the short distance to Christ Church. Lindemann made Harvey available to him, at his beck and call, for the duration of his visit. When they arrived at Christ Church the professor put him up in rooms on the Great Quadrangle, otherwise known as Tom Quad. Ethel checked into a nearby hotel, undoubtedly to deflect attention away from her presence on the trip.

His first lecture, on the Theory of Relativity, took place on the ninth of May under the arched beams and surrounded by the magnificent arched stained-glass windows of Milner Hall, the great meeting hall at Rhodes House. The room was packed with distinguished faculty members, university dons and students, some of whom were forced to stand.

His second talk, on Cosmology and the Expansion of the Universe, followed the next week in the same venue. It was not as well-attended, in part because he had chosen to deliver the lectures in German rather than English, a decision that he regretted after the fact, even though his English was halting at best.

His third and final lecture was planned for Saturday, the twenty-third, the same day the university would bestow upon him an honorary doctorate. The subject would be the Unified Field Theories. He would weave into this lecture, as he had the other two, his views on the profound unknowingness of science. That same year, in *Living Philosophies*, he would expound on this, writing: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science."

Christ Church

Christ Church, one of the largest colleges at Oxford, could trace its roots back to its founding in 1546 by Henry VIII. Anyone passing through the gate of Tom Tower, the college's magnificent bell tower designed by Christopher Wren, with its Late Gothic-styled octagonal lantern and ogee dome, and into Wolsey's Great Quadrangle, could not help but be awestruck.

G.K. and Frances stood in the center of Tom Quad with Lucian Oldershaw on the evening of their arrival and listened to Great Tom ring one-hundred-one times at five minutes after nine o'clock, as it would at precisely the same time every night to commemorate the college's one-hundred original scholars, plus one. Anyone within earshot of the sounding of Great Tom, as its massive clapper struck against the wall of the six-and-a-quarter ton bell, would be inspired by the gravitas of three centuries of British history.

"Would you like to meet Dr. Einstein?" Lucian Oldershaw asked his brother-in-law. "He is here for three weeks and is scheduled to deliver a lecture this Saturday. I can promise nothing, but at the very least I should be able to arrange for you to slip into Milner Hall to hear him speak." Chesterton conveyed to Oldershaw that he would consider it an honor to hear, and perhaps spend time with, the esteemed Nobel laureate.

Oldershaw's most promising avenue to an audience with Einstein was through Professor Lindemann, who had taken it upon himself to serve as the scientist's host, entertainer and guide during the entirety of his visit. Oldershaw arranged for a meeting with Lindemann at Boswell's Tea Room on Broad Street. On the Tuesday morning before Einstein's last lecture Oldershaw, Lindemann and Chesterton met for tea at a table in a secluded corner of the crowded room. Oldershaw and Chesterton ordered scones while their companion, a notoriously picky eater, stuck with the tea alone.

"My dear fellow, I shall endeavor to arrange a meeting, but you must know that he is a very private man," Lindemann spoke softly so as not to rouse the attention of other patrons in the room. He had a tendency to mumble anyway. That, combined with overtones of a German accent, caused Chesterton to lean in and touch his hand to his ear, discreetly pulling it forward to better make out what the man was saying. Lindemann raised his brows and stared into Chesterton's eyes. "A condition of his consenting to visit the university was that I would shelter him from unwanted intrusions. That having been said, however, I did agree to introduce him to a handful of my friends and acquaintances. And given that you are a distinguished gentleman of

letters whom he has surely read, I should think that he would welcome the opportunity to assemble with you.”

“I would be most grateful for that,” the writer and philosopher replied. “Two of my dear friends, Messrs. Shaw and Wells, have met with him, and I would be honored to add myself to the list.”

Lindemann paused for several minutes before speaking. “Mr. Chesterton. There is one issue that has been preying on my mind since your brother-in-law beseeched me to make an introduction.” Lindemann looked at Oldershaw then at Chesterton, pursing his lips. “As you must know, Dr. Einstein is an ardent Zionist. There has been talk for some time that you do not share his sentiments regarding the Jewish people and their lot.”

Chesterton sat up in his seat and fiddled with his bushy yellow mustache before speaking, his deep sapphire eyes peering over the tiny glasses pinching the bridge of his nose. “Mr. Lindemann, I can only assure you that my position on the subject has been mischaracterized. My friends and I have been reviled by unrepentant accusers. In fact, I myself am a Zionist, and I would welcome the opportunity to disabuse Dr. Einstein of any notion to the contrary. Furthermore, I reacted with horror at the success of Herr Hitler and his party in the election last September. I am fully prepared to engage with Dr. Einstein with compassion and understanding should the subject arise.”

“Very well then,” Lindemann nodded in acknowledgment as he rose to leave. “I can empathize with your plight, as I have fought the same misconceptions among the public and, frankly, some of my closest friends. But they forget that it was I who fought mightily to persuade the venerated German Jew to visit our hallowed campus.”

As the three men shook hands, Lindemann agreed to arrange a meeting, but only on the condition that he attend as well to serve as interpreter. Einstein had been endeavoring to learn English but it was going slowly. Lindemann feared that, without someone present to help the conversation along, the two men would not get on well.

Chesterton followed Lindemann and Oldershaw out the door. He remembered having passed Eastgate Tobacco Shop, on High Street, as his host had shepherded him through downtown Oxford. Knowing that he and Einstein shared a love of smoke, he headed straight there. He purchased a two-ounce tin of *Revelation* Virginia/Burley pipe tobacco, purveyed by the House of Windsor and purported by Bernard Shaw to be one of Einstein’s favorites. This, thought Chesterton, would be a fitting gesture of goodwill in the event the two men got to meet.

Lindemann was successful in arranging a get-together. On the Friday morning before his final lecture the next day, Einstein would rendezvous with Chesterton and Lindemann at the Christ Church Library, an imposing Georgian building on the south edge of Peckwater Quadrangle. They met at the far end of the upper library so as not to attract attention. Einstein led them to a grouping of three secluded chairs separated by a low, round table near the southernmost wall of the building and adjacent to a massive collection of books on Hebrew studies. Chesterton wondered if that particular location had been chosen to make a point. As the three men sat around the table, Chesterton was struck by the slightness of the German scientist, a stark contrast to his own six-foot-four-inch, two-hundred-eighty-five pound frame. Chesterton reached into the pocket of his Ulster coat and retrieved the tin of pipe tobacco. He handed it across the table to Einstein, who proceeded to open the tin and take in the citrus-fruit aroma of the ribbon-cut tobacco. Einstein thanked Chesterton in clumsy English for his generous gift and apologized for arriving empty-handed.

“I speak it very bad English,” Einstein exclaimed, his eyelids heavy under his bushy eyebrows.

“Dr. Einstein, please do not apologize. I can assure you that your English is superior to my German. And your gift to me is agreeing to meet. I cannot tell you enough what a privilege it is to be able to commune with you. My dear friend Bernard Shaw has spoken with reverence of the time he and you spent together in—”

Einstein raised his palm and interrupted Chesterton mid-sentence, speaking in German as Lindemann interpreted. “Please call me Albert. Yes, Mr. Shaw spoke at a dinner in my honor last year. I am grateful that he and your mutual friend Mr. Wells, whose sentiments I questioned for quite some time, have become active in the International League.”

“The International League?” Chesterton cocked his head and frowned.

“The International League for Combating Anti-Semitism,” Einstein replied, again in German. “I am surprised that you have not heard of it. Your friends have come to know it well.” He paused. “And since we’ve arrived at this topic so soon into our conversation, Mr. Chesterton, please share with me your views on the plight of my people.”

“To begin with, given that you have been so kind as to encourage a first-name relationship even as we have only met minutes ago, I should be honored if you would simply call me Gilbert.” Chesterton took a deep breath and steeled himself before continuing. “Now, as to the topic at hand, I must tell you that I have been rebuked by friend and foe alike with unfounded

and untrue accusations. I have always considered myself to be a champion of the underdog, not the top dog. And anyone on the face of this dear earth with any semblance of understanding knows that your people, the Jews of this world, have always been the underdog. Throughout history you have had to fight for everything beneficial that has come to you. The Good Lord willing, this will change in time. I have spoken out on countless occasions in opposition to violence against the Jews, whether it be the pogroms of the Tsars or the riots in Swansea. And I am deeply troubled by that man Hitler and what he is doing in Germany. I can only hope that he never comes to power.”

Einstein nodded and struggled to speak in English. “But what about a Jewish...” He looked at Lindemann. “How it say ‘die Heimat’?”

“Homeland,” Lindemann interjected. “My dear Einstein, please, in German. I will make sure your message gets through without prejudice, as it were.” He looked over at Chesterton. “Please go on.”

“My dear Albert, I, too, am an ardent Zionist. Why, a decade ago I advocated in *The New Jerusalem* for a homeland for your people. In fact, and I quote directly from the book, I wrote that the Jews deserved the ‘dignity and status of a separate nation’.” Chesterton looked up at Einstein, sitting across from him.

“If, as you say, you are a Zionist, is it because you desire for us the homeland we have never had, or is it your form of apartheid, a way to eliminate our corrupting influence on your life?”

“It’s most assuredly the former,” Chesterton countered. “Why, for many years I have stated publicly that our Christian faith calls us to be Zionists. I have even said so in writing.”

“I shall remain skeptical,” Einstein waved his hand in the air. “But let us put that aside for now.”

“I would postulate,” Chesterton continued, “that there is more that brings us together, more common ground on myriad subjects, than separates us. As one example, whereas I am a devout Christian and you are, if I am not mistaken, an atheist, we both believe in the power of awe and wonder to change men’s lives. This is something upon which I believe we can surely agree.”

“No, I am not an atheist,” Einstein shot back. “I have devoted my life to science, to the exploration and discovery of new things, to the relentless pursuit of knowledge. To me, belief in God, as most people define it, or him, is a superstition. But living in awe and humility in the

presence of something greater than myself, of something transcendent and unknown, that, my dear Gilbert, is the wellspring of humanity.” He sat up straight in his chair. His eyes widened as a faint smile came across his face. “Not only can awe change men’s lives,” he said in German. “I believe that without it man cannot survive.. Without it we have nothing. The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious.”

As Chesterton was preparing to respond Einstein interrupted him. “I am a devoutly religious man even though my religion may not comport with yours. I am a determinist, which I accept is incompatible with the religious views of my ancestors, but nevertheless I cannot accept the idea of a personal God who controls my life and sits in judgment of me...” He leaned in and locked eyes with Chesterton. “...or of you.”

Chesterton stroked his chin and flashed a broad grin. “I once wrote an essay called ‘The Ethics of Elfland’. Perhaps you have read it?”

Einstein shook his head. “I have little time these days to devote to affairs outside of my work.”

“Well, there’s no reason to fret over that. I suspect that few have read it,” Chesterton chuckled. “If you may indulge me briefly, let me tell you about it. It is about fairy tales. It is about innocence and bewilderment, of the astonishment that we experience as children. As we grow older we worship facts. We worship doctrine and laws. We worship rules. We live lives of skepticism. And this, I advance to you, is destructive to awe and wonder, and ultimately to the existence of mankind.”

“I, too, wrote an essay on the subject just last year,” Einstein responded as Lindemann struggled to keep up. “It is called ‘What I Believe’ and was intended as a response to those who have unfairly labeled me an atheist or, at the very least, an irreligious person. In the essay I propose that the most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. To me, imagination is more worthy than knowledge. The day that I no longer walk this earth in the presence of imagination, awe and bewilderment, as experienced through the eyes of a child, is the day that I no longer have reason to live. In this I believe as surely as I sit here today with you, in these hallowed halls.”

“It’s when I think of God, of the glorious things he has done,” Chesterton said. “That’s when I am most awestruck. When we are asked why eggs turn to birds or fruits fall in autumn, we must answer that it is *magic*. It is not a law, for we do not understand its general formula. It is not a necessity, for though we can count on it happening, practically, we have no right to say that

it must always happen.” Chesterton gazed into Einstein’s eyes. “So tell me, Professor, what are some examples of your own awe?”

“Did you visit the Grand Canyon on your trip to America?”

Chesterton shook his head.

“Well, my dear Gilbert, the next time your travels take you across the Atlantic, you must experience its grandeur, its majesty. One of the seven natural wonders of the world, it stretches 450 kilometers across, and in places it is one kilometer deep. When I stand at its rim, I am rapt in awe. And when I behold the Milky Way on a cloudless night. In fact, I am perhaps most awestruck when I ponder the reason for my own existence.”

Chesterton gazed out the window and onto Peckwater Quadrangle. He looked up at Einstein. “Albert, would you like to take a walk with me? I would enjoy continuing our conversation over a smoke.”

The three men descended the steps onto the quadrangle. Einstein reached into his pocket and retrieved his brier pipe, so well-used that he had worn a hole through its bit. Chesterton watched with fascination as he held the *Revelation* tobacco tin in his right palm and the pipe bowl between his right thumb and index finger. He removed the lid with his left hand. Holding the lid between his ring and little fingers he carefully removed a fingerful of tobacco and tamped it into the pipe bowl with his left index finger. He replaced the lid on the tin, returned it to his coat pocket, and retrieved a Bowers Sure Fire lighter from the same pocket. As Einstein lit his pipe Chesterton mused, “my dear Albert, I am impressed. You have most assuredly perfected the art of pipe smoking.” Einstein looked up at him and smiled.

The two men walked through Peckwater Quadrangle, Chesterton puffing on his robusto and Einstein drawing the aromatic blend through the stem of his brier, the smoke clouds curling and dancing over the bowl. Lindemann followed far enough behind to avoid the smoke, which he had spent a lifetime decrying, but near enough to continue interpreting for the men. The devout man of letters and the agnostic scientist continued to bond over their mutual veneration of the power of imagination and bewilderment, of awe and wonder.

As the shadows across the quadrangle shortened and the noon hour approached, they went their separate ways, the one to spend the afternoon with Frances, the other to retire to his quarters to prepare for the next day’s lecture, and Lindemann to return to his professorial duties. Chesterton and Einstein had formed an enduring friendship by finding common ground even in the face of differences that would have beguiled lesser men.

Nine Decades Later

Where do you turn if you want to study the effects of awe and wonder on real people in real-life experiences? How can you examine what both Chesterton and Einstein believed was vital to humankind's existence in non-laboratory settings?

Dr. Beau Lotto, a neuroscience professor at the University of London and visiting scholar at New York University, wanted answers. He had a solid foundation to build on, going all the way back to 1924. That's the year that a German psychiatrist named Hans Berger recorded the first human EEG brain waves. But Berger was so cautious about the technique he had invented for "recording the electrical activity of the human brain from the surface of the head" that he would not publish his findings until 1929. Two decades or so later, British neurophysiologist William Grey Walter mapped electrical activity across the surface of the brain using EEG topography. Over the years since, scientists and physicians have used these techniques to study the connection between brain activity, emotions, and behavior, albeit mostly in the confines of a controlled environment.

As Dr. Lotto contemplated ways to study the effects of experiencing wonder in non-laboratory settings, he had an idea. Through his New York-based neuro-design studio, Lab of Misfits, he reached out to a troupe of performers who have inspired awe in live audiences worldwide for over twenty years, Cirque du Soleil. And together they came up with a plan. Over ten performances of the show "O" in Las Vegas, they fitted almost three-hundred audience members with EEG *brain caps* to study their neural responses to a host of *awe moments* throughout the show.

His findings suggest that the experience of awe and wonder enhances creativity, increases risk-tolerance, reduces stress and enables us to "recalibrate our feelings about the future and reshape our perceptions about the past." More work is needed to validate Dr. Lotto's findings, but they are noteworthy.

Bridging The Gap

Albert Einstein would live another twenty-four years after that day in May on the campus of Oxford University. He would continue to build on the seminal work that had won him a Nobel prize in Physics in 1921. He was visiting America when, in 1933, Adolf Hitler came to power. He would not return to Germany, remaining in America and becoming a US citizen in 1940. The father of the theory of relativity, he is also known for his influence on the philosophy of science. He published more than three-hundred scientific papers and more than one-hundred-fifty

nonscientific works. His conviction in the power of awe and reverence for the mysterious never faltered.

G.K. Chesterton died of congestive heart failure in 1936 at his home in Beaconsfield. He is still remembered as a literary critic, historian, theologian, essayist and novelist. In the course of his life he wrote over eighty books, several hundred works of poetry, two-hundred short stories and four-thousand essays. He maintained close friendships with George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells until he died. He never lost faith in the essence of wonder.

Much of what we understand today about the brain would have been a mystery to these men. They would have been familiar to some degree with the work of their contemporary, the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud. In fact, Einstein and Freud exchanged letters about the psychological impact of war and how to make the world free of armed conflict. However, there is no indication that Freud's work, and the study of neuroscience in general, played a significant role in their lives.

As for circuses, Chesterton and Einstein lived in what many people claimed was the golden age of The Greatest Show On Earth and its lesser counterparts. Circuses were much like carnivals then, replete with menageries of poorly-treated animals, marginally safe feats of derring-do, human cannonballs and freak shows that exploited biological rarities and human frailties. The brightly-colored wagons, smiling circus clowns and performers in exotic costumes did little to mask their dark side. Neither Einstein nor Chesterton likely had time or tolerance for such things. Circuses in their day, with their salacious indulgences, brutish traditions and man-made contrivances, could never inspire awe the way nature could, the way real-life experiences of real people going about their daily lives could. What could these two men possibly learn from a circus?

A hallmark of creativity is the bringing together of disparate entities or ideas in a novel way. Einstein and Chesterton did this throughout their lives. And Dr. Lotto has done it by combining modern-day neuroscience with a circus performance, of all things. One wonders what these great icons of history would have thought of his work to find a scientific basis for what they both understood to be essential to a meaningful life.

Prince of Paradox was a term applied to Chesterton by J.D. Douglas in 1974 in Christianity Today. The term Light-Beam Rider is taken from Walter Isaacson's 2007 biography of Einstein.