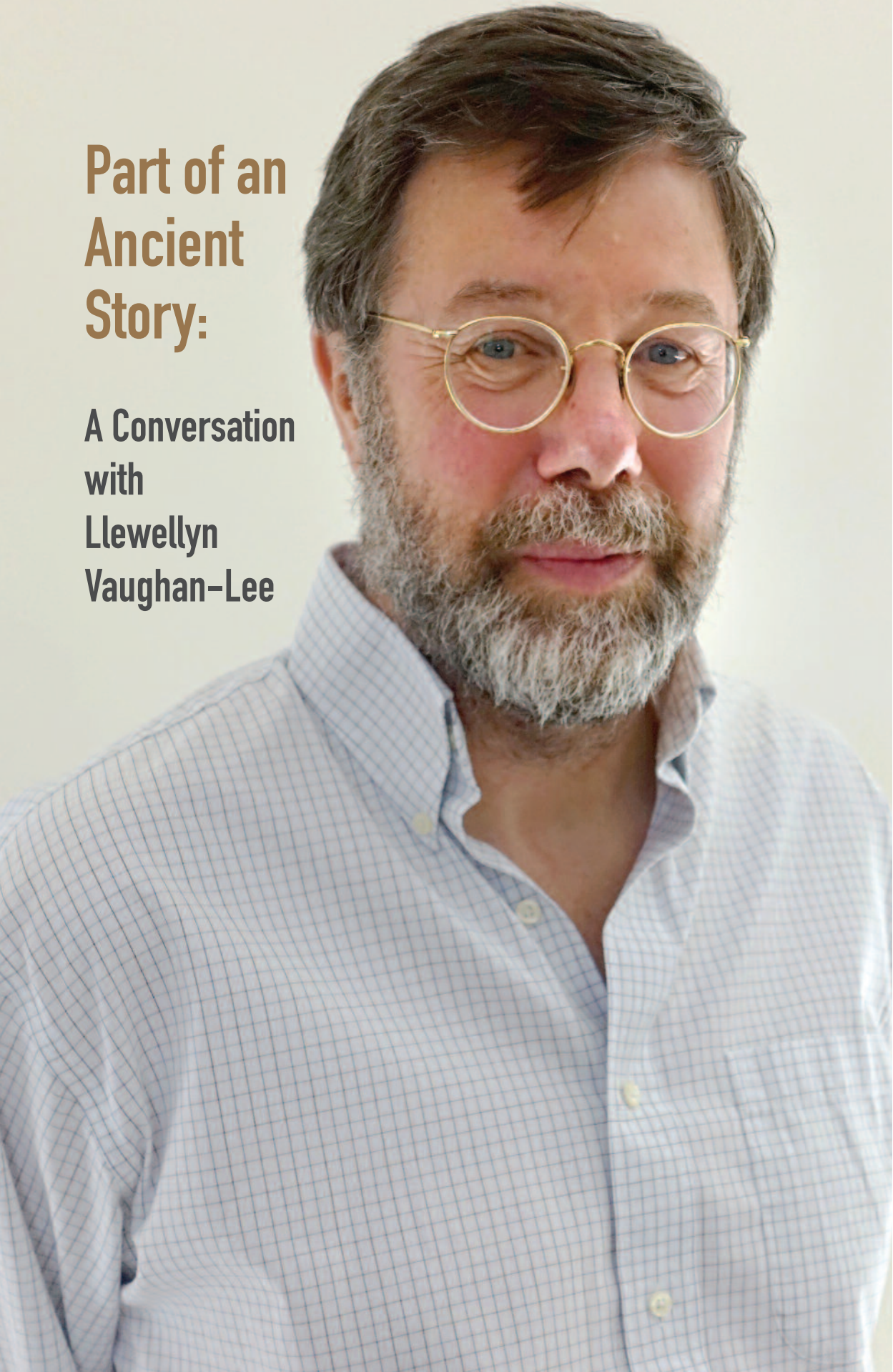


Part of an Ancient Story:

A Conversation with Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee



Photography by Richard Whittaker

ONE AUGUST DAY RECENTLY in northern California, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee sat down with *Parabola* in to speak about free will and destiny. The English-born Vaughan-Lee is a Sufi mystic and lineage holder in the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya Sufi Order and the founder of The Golden Sufi Center. Sitting in a big, sun filled room, surrounded by people from around the world, all gathered for a morning meditation, he spoke of his unusual destiny, the journey of his lineage of Sufism to the West, and of our common destiny on an Earth in crisis. Vaughan-Lee is the author of *SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY*, *FRAGMENTS OF A LOVE STORY*, *DARKENING OF THE LIGHT*, and other books. His most recent book is *FOR LOVE OF THE REAL: A STORY OF LIFE'S MYSTICAL SECRET*. For more information, please visit www.goldensufi.org.

Tracy Cochran

Parabola: Can you tell us about your journey and about how you experience free will and destiny? How did you get from being where you were to where you're sitting right now?

LLEWELLYN VAUGHAN-LEE: I was a middle-class English schoolboy in the 1950's, sent off to boarding school at seven years old—lots of sports, cold baths, Latin and Greek. Reflecting back, nobody ever asked me what I wanted. That question never came up. It was a very programmed existence, and so in that sense there was not much free will. It was somebody else's story, not really my story. Then one day when I was sixteen years old, suddenly there was another story. It happened in the English subway. A boyfriend of my elder sister, who was an American, lent me a book on Zen, which was becoming popular at the time, and I read a Zen koan: "The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection, the water has no mind to receive their image." Suddenly and

inexplicably, rather than this very grey story of boarding school, there were colors, suddenly there was joy, suddenly there was magic present. It was as if somebody had said, "turn the page."

I started to meditate and found myself in completely other realities, in the vast emptiness beyond the mind—a feeling of total freedom. Maybe that was a first finger of destiny, the first touch of a completely different story that had nothing to do with my background, nothing to do with the life I knew. I began to look for a teacher.

One evening when I was nineteen years old, I was invited to a talk on the esoteric dimension of mathematics in South Kensington Library. Sitting in the row in front of me was an old lady with her white hair tied up in a bun. After the talk I was introduced. She gave me one look with these piercing blue eyes and I had the physical experience of becoming a piece of dust on the floor. I had no idea what it meant. I had no idea what

was happening. She invited me to her meditation group, and then another story began—I became part of a very ancient story.

Years later I discovered the Sufi saying that the disciple has to become less than the dust at the feet of the teacher. The experience of becoming a speck of dust on the floor referred to a whole tradition of what happens to the disciple in the hands of the teacher. I knew nothing at the time; I didn't study Sufism. Irina Tweedie, who was the white-haired woman with piercing blue eyes, didn't even teach Sufism the way we understand teaching. But looking back it was like another whole story had begun—a completely different book. I wonder if it was really my story because, in a way, it was also her story that began twelve years earlier when, in her fifties,

Irina Tweedie



she arrived in a northern Indian town called Kanpur. Leaving the railway station she got into a horse-drawn carriage and went to meet a guru. She arrived, hot and dusty from the journey, and coming towards her from a white bungalow down to the gate was a tall Indian man with a long grey beard and blazing dark eyes. He greeted her and told her to come the next morning, when he asked her, “Why did you come to me?”—the traditional question that the teacher asks a would-be disciple.

P: That exact phrase?

LV-L: That exact phrase. This belongs to another whole story and a whole tradition and a whole destiny, which actually began many centuries before when one of the early Sufi masters, Yûsuf Hamâdani, set out from Baghdad with twelve friends and travelled to Bukhara, where he was to meet ‘Abd’l-Khâliq Ghijduwânî, the founder of the Naqshbandi tradition. Their meeting began the story and destiny of the Naqshbandi path, transmitted from teacher to disciple, which continued many centuries later with this meeting between Irina Tweedie and her Sufi sheikh, Radha Mohan Lal, through which this particular Sufi path came to the West.

P: Did you ever speak of the experience of feeling like dust at her feet? I’m wondering if she felt the same way when she met her teacher.

LV-L: The experience she had was that something in her instinctively came to attention before him; she knew she was in the presence of a Great Man. Where this comes from, one doesn’t know because it’s such an old story. This English schoolboy who had a few experiences of meditation, who met a few spiritual teachers, suddenly stepped into the pages of a very old book and suddenly that book became my story. Again what has it to do with me? Even looking back now forty years, I wonder.

P: Why you?

LV-L: Yes! What was this? And it started to do things to me, to change me, and in a way my life since then has been living this story or this destiny. I had a very dramatic spiritual experience when I was twenty-three. One summer afternoon, after a very intense inner time, I was woken up on the plane of the Self. I was woken up into this completely different dimension—a dimension of love, of light, of Oneness, of a completely different state of consciousness. Nobody had told me about it before; I never read about it, and it completely shocked me. I didn’t know what to do. Luckily my mother offered to look after me. She cooked for me. I didn’t eat very much, and I would just sit there in my room. Sometimes I would pray all night, sit all day, there was no time, there was no space. This went on for a few months.

Then at the beginning of January, I had a dream and in this dream I was shown a book for the year. One of the things about stories or destiny is that there is a book of our life and some of it is written and some of it we write ourselves. What has been written, which we have to live, is what one would call one’s destiny; what we get

to write ourselves is, I suppose, free will. That January I was shown the color of the year, which was light blue, and I was told it would be quite an easy year. I also saw written in the book of the year that I would have my heart’s desire.

I knew what my heart’s desire was when I had the dream because I had already fallen in love with a young woman sitting across from me in the little meditation room where Mrs. Tweedie used to live. In the kind of sense of humor that destiny sometimes has, this was January and I had to wait until the middle of December for my heart’s desire to be fulfilled. I fell in love, we had a relationship and got married. We had our first child, my son Emmanuel; a year and a half later, our daughter was born. Then again in a strange play of destiny that never occurred to me, I ended up buying a house with upstairs and downstairs apartments, and invited Mrs. Tweedie to live downstairs as she needed a place for the group. It kind of reminds me of the story of the Zen student who, very lovingly builds a beautiful house and he’s so happy about this house that he invites his teacher, a Zen Roshi, to come and see it. The Zen Roshi comes in and says, “Very nice house, I will live here.”

P: That story echoes what you said about feeling like dust at the feet of your teacher. Many people in the West, certainly here in America, have this longing to truly be seen and loved, and this can so easily turn into an ego-fantasy—at last a great teacher recognizes your true wonderfulness. You describe a very opposite experience, of your ego being kind of pushed out of the way

LV-L: My son Emmanuel said the first words he ever remembered were, “Shh ... they’re meditating.” We lived upstairs and the group met downstairs. Meeting as a group has been a central part of my story, my destiny, and it’s not something I would have dreamt or have chosen. Mrs. Tweedie could connect with her teacher, whom she called Bhai Sahib (elder brother), in meditation. When she was with him in India, he trained her so that he could reach her in meditation after he died. This is very much part of the Naqshbandi tradition (it is called an *Uwaysi* connection). Little did I know that they had plans for me. She said years later that when I first came to her group, she was told in meditation that he would look after me. That’s why I said my story is very much her story, and it is also her teacher’s story, and it’s the story of bringing this particular Sufi tradition to the West. That was her destiny that began when she met him, after she had lived a very full life, and it was my destiny before I got the chance to live what is called a full life.

There were these little seeds. When I was thirty years old, I was a high-school English teacher, which I really enjoyed. I taught Shakespeare. I taught poetry. The girls I taught knew I wasn’t really an English teacher. I thought I had my profession. But they said “Mr. Vaughan-Lee, we know you’re not really an English teacher; you’re not like the other teachers.” I didn’t really know what they meant but one day I was sitting at Mrs. Tweedie’s kitchen table and in passing she said, “Oh, your life will change completely in six years time,” and that’s all she said.

P: *Just in passing?*

LV-L: Just in passing. Yet again there was this very subtle but explicit turning of the page of the book that I had to live, which had to do with my destiny in America. In the summer of 1987 Irina Tweedie came to the Bay Area to lecture. Her book *DAUGHTER OF FIRE* had just been published. I first came to California in February that year to arrange her lecture tour. I had no interest in America before. One day I drove across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco to Marin County, and I stopped and went for a walk on the Marin Headlands. It was a beautiful sunny day, and suddenly I knew that this is where my life’s work would take place.

What is interesting is that when you are taken by these forces, somehow you don’t think about what it means.

Suddenly destiny was again present and it spoke to my soul, or sang to my soul, and four years later, I found myself living here. It wasn’t what I’d planned. We had a house in London. My wife in particular looked after Mrs. Tweedie. We looked after the group, and really we thought we would look after her until she died. She was old then, and we thought that our lives’ work was to look after her. We had been looking after her for eleven years. Then one June morning at about two in the afternoon, I was standing in my kitchen looking out at the lovely garden. Mrs. Tweedie planted

the flowers, but I was very proud of my lawn without weeds, an English lawn, and suddenly I was hit by this energy. It came—*whoop*—it was so strong it almost threw me on the floor, and it shifted my consciousness from one place to another. I knew at that moment it was time to go to America. I went downstairs, went round through the garden gate, knocked on Mrs. Tweedie’s French windows and told her. We were both a bit shocked. I said we’re going to be leaving in two months time. What is interesting is that when you are taken by these forces, somehow you don’t think about what it means. I didn’t know what I was doing in America. I knew this was where my life’s journey had taken me. We moved here in the hills beside the ocean; a friend kindly rented us a house.

P: *In the minds of most people, fate is what happens to you and destiny is your highest human potential. Two questions come up: First, does everyone have a destiny? Second, how do you see your special destiny?*

LV-L: The soul comes into incarnation with a purpose, with an imprint—one would call it the destiny of the soul. The soul then aspires to attract the right environment to live out the destiny of the soul. For most people it’s a very broad canvas. The outline of the story is there but the pages are left blank and



there are different ways to live their destiny. For example: a friend of mine who lives in Los Angeles had a very domineering mother. One day she had a dream in which her mother said very clearly, “My destiny was to have five children. Your destiny is to realize the Truth.”

My friend is driven by another force that pushes her towards the Truth. We work with dreams, and she had a dream in which she met our teacher, Radha Mohan Lal, Irina Tweedie’s Indian teacher, and he held out his hand and there was a veil hanging from his hand. He lifted it for a moment and behind the veil there was so much light it made her blind, and then he dropped the veil and pointed to a dusty road and said that is the road you must travel to reach the light—that road was her destiny and also would take her to

One can have a physical destiny, but spiritual destiny has to do with the spiritual evolution of the soul. So everybody has a destiny.



Miniature from *Rose Garden of the Pious*, Jami, 1553

her destiny. Part of my work as a Sufi teacher, and the work that I have been trained to do, is that when somebody comes to this path, to recognize the destiny of their soul, the highest potential of the soul, and to help them to have the circumstances to enable that to be fulfilled.

These circumstances take different forms. Sometimes, not so often, one points to a certain shift in outer life circumstances. A couple of years ago I

said to somebody I met in London, “You really need to come here to America and be with us, if you want to live out your soul’s destiny; it just won’t work for you in England.” But normally it is an inner connection that is given—a connection from heart to heart through which a certain love can be given to the wayfarer because we work with love to transform them and give them the energy to follow the path. This connection in the

Naqshbandi tradition is called *rabita*. Then mostly I leave them alone, but occasionally I have to point them in a certain direction, to realign them so that they have the possibility to live out their highest destiny. Sometimes this happens during life and sometimes this happens at the moment of death. There was a friend who passed away a few years ago, and I sat with her in the hospital two weeks before she passed, and we just sat there and I prayed with her and suddenly her eyes filled with light and she saw the light to which she was going and there was this great big smile on her face. Her whole face lit up and I thought, *Now I’ve done my work, now she is free to go on*. She has fulfilled her spiritual destiny in this life. One can have a physical destiny, but spiritual destiny has to do with the spiritual evolution of the soul. So everybody has a destiny.

This is a particular moment in my destiny because my life’s work since I met my teacher was to establish this path in the West. She brought it to the West, and when I first came to her group there were just ten of us sitting in her little room in North London by the train tracks, meditating, having a cup of tea together, and slowly it grew, but she never established an organization. She left behind one amazing and unique book, a few interviews and some lectures in German. I was asked to establish it in the West. So I’ve written many books

that try to explain the Sufi principles and practices and also given talks about this tradition to make it accessible to people in the West. We started a nonprofit organization and now it’s established. Three or four weeks ago, again I saw this book. I see it from time to time, every few years, the book of my life.

P: *And it changes color?*

LV-L: Yes, and what is interesting is that it often has a leather cover because leather symbolizes the physical world, our body, and it means what has to be lived in this world. Some things have to be lived in this outer world, some just in prayer and meditation. In the book on a white page was written very clearly, “You have done everything you could do. It is over.” And that meant that this story I had been living since I was nineteen years old, of meditating and going deep within the heart and then bringing out the teachings of this path and taking the path to America as well as in Europe, has been completed.

That story in my life has been told. I have lived it. It took more out of me than I would have believed possible. When you have these forces that make you live a destiny that isn’t just your destiny, it is incredibly demanding because you’re always living on the edge, you’re always being pushed and pushed by these forces... What happens now? I don’t know.

*We are at a pivotal moment
in the destiny of the Earth,
and our story is the Earth's story.*

P: *This segues into an underlying question: Why do we have these particular "I's"?*

LV-L: Irina Tweedie met the Dalai Lama twice: once when he was a young monk in India, and once in 1984, in Interlaken, Switzerland. Each time she was allowed to ask him a question and she asked him the same question twice. The question was, "In the deepest states of nirvana does anything remain?" The first time he said, "Well, I'm a young monk and I don't know from experience, but from what I have read, yes, something remains." Thirty years later, she asked him the same question and he said, "Yes, from my own experience, something remains. Otherwise there would be no purpose to the whole human experience." That really is the nub of my personal journey in the midst of this other story.

I wrote two autobiographical books. The first one, *THE FACE BEFORE I WAS BORN*, tells the story of what happened since I was sixteen years old—a story of spiritual transformation. The recent one, *FRAGMENTS OF A LOVE STORY*, was more about what it is that remains. What is this very human element? And I haven't understood it yet. Maybe this is something I will never really come to understand. I don't know. What is the real nature of the human being that is divine and yet human? We come from a patriarchal era and most of the mystical traditions are about being lost in bliss

or ecstasy, about absorption, about oneness with God, of the drop returning to the ocean.

But I always return to the idea of relationship which I feel belongs to the feminine. In our very human essence there is a relationship to God, to each other and to the Earth and all of creation.

P: *We have consent to open to one another and to life.*

LV-L: I think it is within the destiny of every soul to uncover a little bit of the mystery of what it really means to be a human being.

They say in the Naqshbandi tradition, the end is present at the beginning—that when you first step upon the path it contains the seeds of the whole journey. In the last ten years or so I have been drawn very much into what I call spiritual ecology—the nature of our spiritual relationship to the Earth at this time. The Earth is going through a time of crisis. People politely call it "climate change." But what I've come to understand is that it's not just a physical crisis, it's a spiritual crisis. The ancients always understood that the Earth is a living spiritual being. Just as we have a soul, the Earth has a soul, what they called the *anima mundi*. The Earth is calling to us and needs our attention. This is a moment in the destiny of the Earth.

Recently I have felt more and more what I call "the cry of the Earth." It

has evoked a deep love for the Earth, this Earth that has given me life, that has been so generous with me. It is our love for the Earth that will help heal the Earth. We are at a pivotal moment in the destiny of the Earth, and our story is the Earth's story. Our destiny is also the Earth's destiny. I don't know how much the destiny of the Earth is tied up with the free will of human beings. Fifteen years ago, I was given a whole series of visions about the Earth: about the possible future of the Earth, about the Earth waking up, and about the heart of the world starting to sing—that was for me the most precious of all of the visions I was given. Suddenly, I heard the song of the soul of the world, the song of all creation.

I wonder how much free will human beings have in the spiritual destiny of the Earth. I wonder whether those of us who are called to say "yes" to working with the Earth can balance the very powerful forces of exploitation—forces of consumerism, multinational forces, forces of greed. We also have to say "no" quite categorically, that sustainability is not about supporting our consumer-driven culture, but about all of creation. What is the destiny of the Earth and what is our relationship to it? Can the Earth as a living being throw off this dark magic of consumerism that is destroying it?



You see our destiny and the destiny of the Earth are bound together in ways we don't understand. It's not about what "I" want from life. We are part of life's dream, we are part of life's destiny. We belong to this living oneness, this beautiful suffering wholeness. We need to find this thread of the real story of our life—not the story that we see on the television or the news, not even the story our parents tell us—but the real story of our life. I was taken by a story and turned inside out and was taken to other realities, to other continents, and was consumed by a story. For most people probably it's not so dramatic, but in a way it's the same story. It is life's story, it is the Beloved's story—it is the one story. But it's whether we are prepared to say yes to it. Yes? ■