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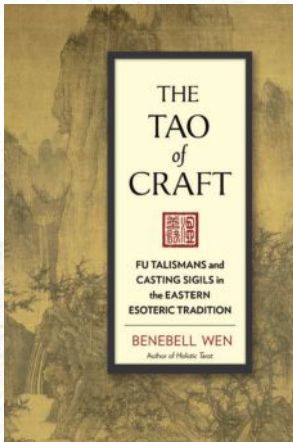
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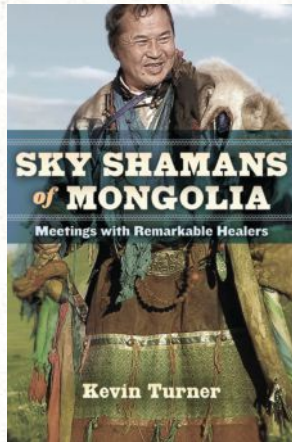


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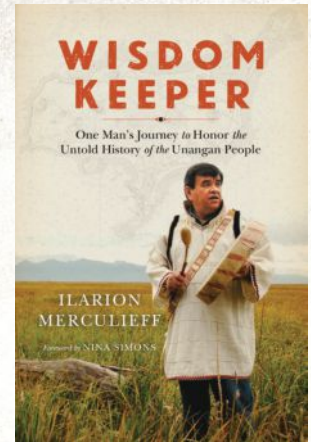


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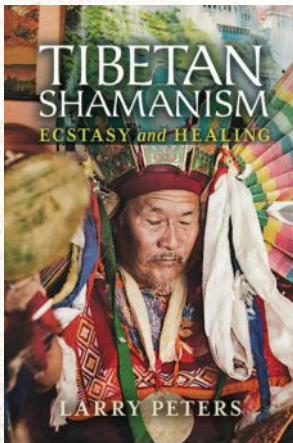


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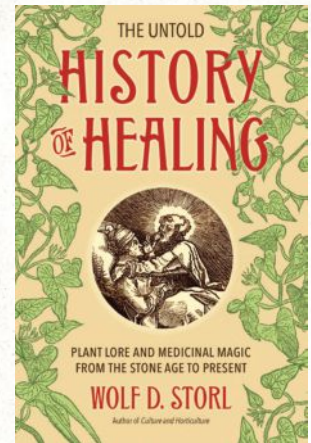
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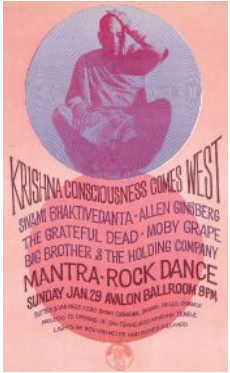
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Photo by Dino Reichmuth.
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“**B**ETWEEN STIMULUS AND RESPONSE THERE IS A SPACE,” wrote psychiatrist and neurologist Viktor Frankl in his unforgettable memoir of his life in a Nazi death camp, *MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING*. “In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

In this Spring 2017 issue of *Parabola*, Frankl’s grandson Alexander Vesely explains how the Holocaust survivor found meaning in acts of generosity, describing how Frankl once bought a radio for a stranger because he heard the man say he couldn’t afford to buy one, telling young Vesely: “Do I need the extra fifty bucks or would it be more meaningful if this man had those fifty bucks?” In myriad ways, we explore how loss—through death or theft or failure or the poverty that can come with being a dedicated artist or spiritual seeker—can open us to the richness of meaning. As Carl Jung discovered in his exploration of the I Ching, detailed here in an essay by analyst Annette Lowe, meaning is opening to relationships beyond causality, to truths that call us from unknown depths.

The great paradox known by ancient and Aboriginal peoples invoked in this issue is that this sense of existing in the vast space of the cosmos can be known in the depths of the human heart. “Put the mind in the heart,” writes Cynthia Bourgeault here, drawing from the *PHILOKALIA*, a revered spiritual collection from the Christian East. The ancient ones of the East and the West knew, as the Aboriginal ones still know, that the heart is an organ of subtle perception, intuition, and feeling.

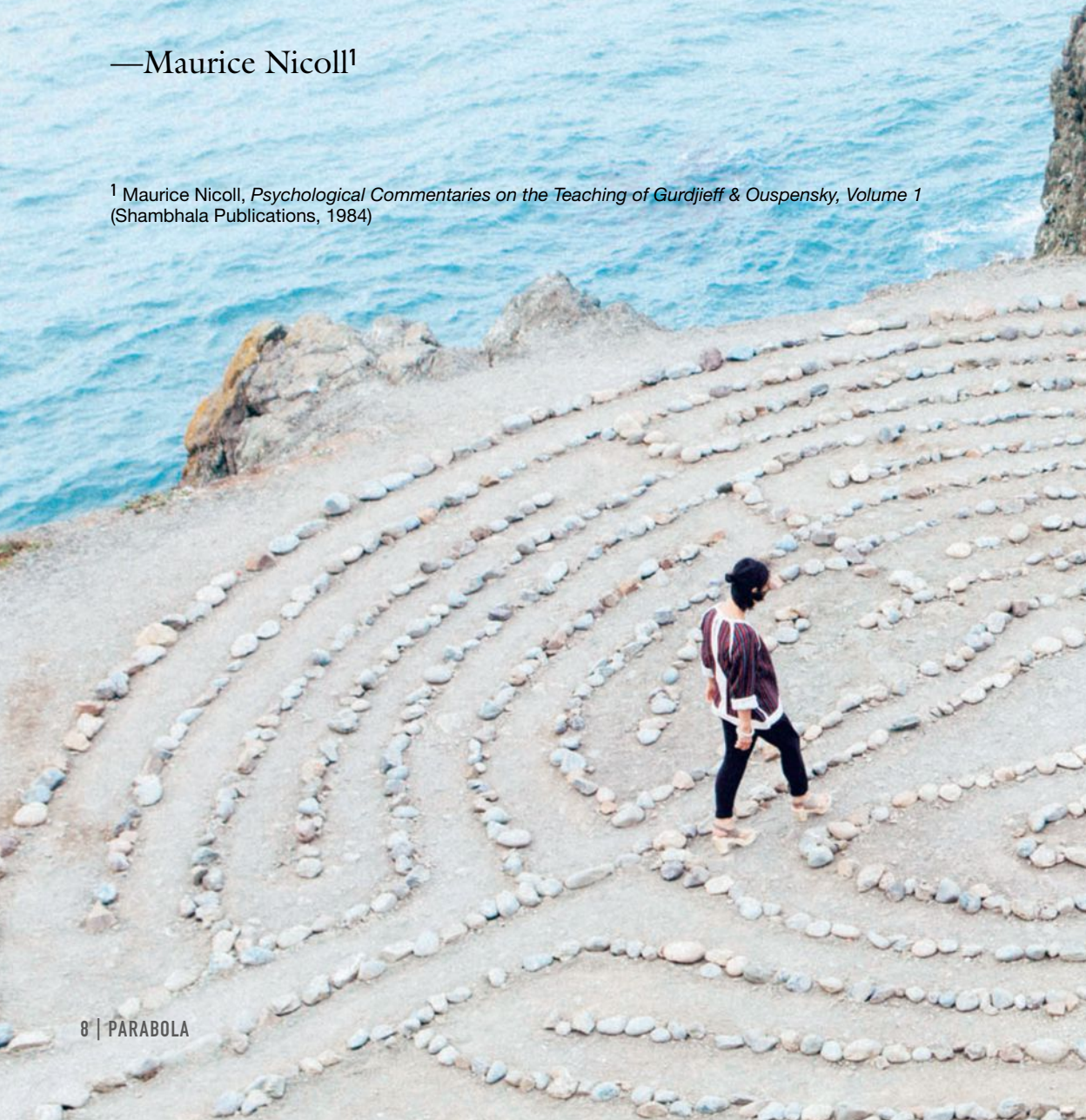
Few knew the oneness of the heart as well as long-time *Parabola* contributor Huston Smith, who died as this issue was created. “Whether we realize it or not, simply to be human is to long for release from mundane existence,” wrote Huston. We at *Parabola* mourn his passing. May this issue help release you from the ordinary workings of stimulus and response, making space for meaning.

—Tracy Cochran

If a man begins to take life as work, then his whole relationship to existence begins to change, because the meaning of life changes for him. He sees life in another light, not as an end but as a means, and this enables him....to take what happens in life so that he learns from life and all that happens in life and in this way life becomes his teacher.

—Maurice Nicoll¹

¹ Maurice Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of Gurdjieff & Ouspensky, Volume 1* (Shambhala Publications, 1984)



Photograph by Ashley Batz





Photograph by Brandon Zierer

From the Christian esoteric tradition, a path beyond the mind

The Way of the Heart

Cynthia Bourgeault

PUT THE MIND IN THE HEART.... Put the mind in the heart.... Stand before the Lord with the mind in the heart.” From page after page in the *PHILOKALIA*, that hallowed collection of spiritual writings from the Christian East, this same refrain emerges. It is striking in both its insistence and its specificity. Whatever that exalted level of spiritual attainment is conceived to be—whether you call it “salvation,” “enlightenment,” “contemplation,” or “divine union”—*this* is the inner configuration in which it is found. This and no other.

It leaves one wondering what these old spiritual masters actually *knew* and—if it’s even remotely as precise and anatomically grounded as it sounds—why this knowledge has not factored more prominently in contemporary typologies of consciousness.

Part of the problem as this ancient teaching falls on contemporary ears is that we will inevitably be hearing it through a modern filter that does not serve it well. In our own times the word “heart” has come to be associated primarily with the emotions (as opposed to the mental operations of the mind), and so the instruction will be inevitably heard as “get out of your mind and into your emotions”—which is, alas, pretty close to 180 degrees from what the instruction is actually saying.

*This capacity to see from within is
explicitly linked to the heart,
and specifically to a “heart of flesh.”*

Yes, it is certainly true that the heart’s native language is affectivity—perception through deep feelingness. But it may come as a shock to contemporary seekers to learn that the things we nowadays identify with the feeling life—passion, drama, intensity, compelling emotion—are qualities that in the ancient anatomical treatises were associated not with the heart but with the liver! They are signs of agitation and turbidity (an excess of bile!) rather than authentic feelingness. In fact, they are traditionally seen as the *roadblocks* to the authentic feeling life, the saboteurs that steal its energy and distort its true nature.

And so before we can even begin to unlock the wisdom of these ancient texts, we need to gently set aside our contemporary fascination with emotivity as the royal road to spiritual authenticity and return to the classic understanding from which these teachings emerge, which features the heart in a far more spacious and luminous role.

According to the great wisdom traditions of the West (Christian, Jewish, Islamic), the heart is first and foremost *an organ of spiritual perception*. Its primary function is to look beyond the obvious, the bounded surface of things, and see into a deeper reality, emerging from some unknown profundity, which plays lightly upon the surface of this life without being caught

there: a world where meaning, insight, and clarity come together in a whole different way. Saint Paul talked about this other kind of perceptivity with the term “faith” (“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”), but the word “faith” is itself often misunderstood by the linear mind. What it really designates is not a leaping into the dark (as so often misconstrued) but a subtle seeing in the dark, a kind of spiritual night vision that allows one to see with inner certainty that the elusive golden thread glimpsed from within actually does lead somewhere.

Perhaps the most comprehensive definition of this wider spiritual perceptivity is from Kabir Helminski, a modern Sufi master. I realize that I quote it in nearly every book I have written, but I do so because it is so fundamental to the wisdom tradition that I have come to know as the authentic heart of Christianity. Here it is yet again:

We have subtle subconscious faculties we are not using. Beyond the limited analytic intellect is a vast realm of mind that includes psychic and extrasensory abilities; intuition; wisdom; a sense of unity; aesthetic, qualitative and creative faculties; and image-forming and symbolic capacities. Though these faculties are many, we give them a single name with some justification for they are working best when they are in concert. They comprise a mind, moreover, in spontaneous connection

to the cosmic mind. This total mind we call “heart.”¹

“The heart,” Helminski continues, is the antenna that receives the emanations of subtler levels of existence. The human heart has its proper field of function beyond the limits of the superficial, reactive ego-self. Awakening the heart, or the spiritualized mind, is an unlimited process of making the mind more sensitive, focused, energized, subtle, and refined, of joining it to its cosmic milieu, the infinity of love.²

Now it may concern some of you that you’re hearing Islamic teaching here, not Christian. And it may well be true that this understanding of the heart as “spiritualized mind”— “the organ prepared by God for contemplation”³— has been brought to its subtlest and most comprehensive articulation in the great Islamic Sufi masters. As early as the tenth century, Al-Hakim al Tirmidhi’s masterful *TREATISE ON THE HEART* laid the foundations for an elaborate Sufi understanding of the heart as a tripartite physical, emotional, and spiritual organ.⁴ On this foundation would gradually rise an expansive repertory of spiritual practices supporting this increasingly “sensitive, focused, energized, subtle, and refined” heart attunement.

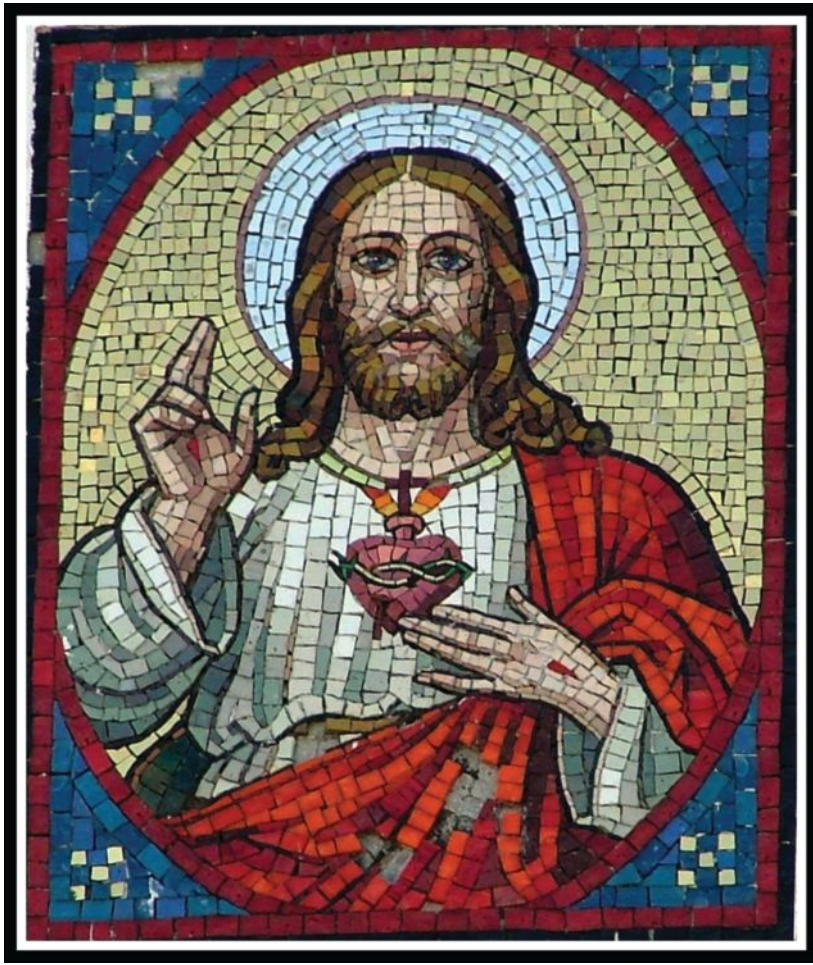
But it’s right there in Christianity as well. Aside from the incomparable Orthodox teachings on Prayer of the Heart collected in the *PHILOKALIA*, it’s completely scriptural. Simply open your Bible to the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:8) and read the words straight from Jesus himself: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

We will return to what “pure in heart” means in due course. But clearly Jesus had a foundational grasp on the



The purification of Muhammad's heart by three Divine messengers. Bal'ami. Early fourteenth century

heart as an organ of spiritual perception, and he had his own highly specific method for catalyzing this quantum leap in human consciousness. I have written extensively about this in my book *THE WISDOM JESUS*, in which I lay out the principles of his kenotic (“letting go”) spirituality as a pathway of conscious transformation leading to nondual awakening. You will see there how this goal formed the core of his teaching, hidden in plain sight for twenty centuries now. I will be drawing on this material from time to time as it becomes pertinent to our present exploration. For now, the essential point is simply to realize that the teaching on the heart is not intrinsically an “Islamic” revelation, any more than it is a “Christian” one. If anything, its headwaters lie in that great evolutionary incubator of Judaism, in which more and more in those final centuries before the Common Era, the great Israelite prophets begin to sense a new evolutionary star rising on the horizon of consciousness. Yahweh is about to do something new, about to up



Mosaic, Jungholz, Austria

the ante in the continuing journey of mutual self-disclosure that has formed the basis of the covenant with Israel. The prophet Ezekiel gets it the most directly, as the following words of revelation tumble from his mouth, directly from the heart of God:

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes and be careful to

observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land I gave to your ancestors, and you shall be my people and I will be your God. (*Ezekiel 36:24–28*)

A new interiority is dawning on the horizon, a new capacity to read the pattern from within: to live the covenant without a need for external forms and regulations, simply by living it from an inner integrity. And for the first time in Western history, this capacity to see from within is explicitly linked to the heart, and specifically to a “heart of flesh.”

Without any attempt to end-run the massive theological and historical parameters that have grown up around this issue, my bare-bones take on Jesus

The heart takes on the subtle individual colors of a person without losing its essential universality.

is that he comes as the “master cardiologist,” the next in the great succession of Hebrew prophets, to do that “heart surgery” first announced by Ezekiel. And his powerfully original (at least in terms of anything heretofore seen in the Semitic lands) method of awakening heart perceptivity—through a radical nonclinging or “letting go”—will in fact reveal itself as the tie rod connecting everything I am talking about in this book.

DO I REALLY MEAN THE PHYSICAL HEART?

Not to be naive here, but yes. We are indeed talking about the physical heart, at least insofar as it furnishes our bodily anchor for all those wondrous voyages into far-flung spiritual realms.

Again, the Eastern Orthodox tradition is not in the least equivocal on this point. Lest there be any tendency to hear the word as merely symbolic of some “innermost essence” of a person, the texts direct us immediately to the chest, where the sign that prayer is progressing will be a palpable physical warmth:

To stand guard over the heart, to stand with the mind in the heart, to descend from the head to the heart—all these are one and the same thing. The core of the work lies in concentrating the attention and the standing before the invisible Lord, not in the head but in

the chest, close to the heart and in the heart. When the divine warmth comes, all this will be clear.⁵

The following instruction is even more specific:

When we read in the writings of the Fathers about the place of the heart which the mind finds by way of prayer, we must understand by this the spiritual faculty that exists in the heart. Placed by the creator in the upper part of the heart, this spiritual faculty distinguishes the human heart from the heart of animals.... The intellectual faculty in man’s soul, though spiritual, dwells in the brain, that is to say in the head: in the same way, the spiritual faculty which we term the spirit of man, though spiritual, dwells in the upper part of the heart, close to the left nipple of the chest and a little above it.⁶

While the sheer physicality of this may make some readers squirm, the contemporary phenomenologist Robert Sardello is another strong advocate for a full inclusion of the physical heart in any serious consideration of the spirituality of the heart. When he speaks of the heart, as he makes clear in his remarkable book *SILENCE: THE MYSTERY OF WHOLENESS*, he is always referring to “the physical organ of the heart,” which merits this special consideration precisely because “it functions simultaneously as a physical, psychic, and spiritual organ.”⁷ It is this seamlessly tripartite nature of the heart’s field of activity that bestows its unusual transformative powers. While there are many spiritual traditions that focus on “the heart as the instrument

through which religious practices take place,” Sardello feels that “these traditions do not focus on the inherent activity of the heart, which is already an act of a spiritual nature.”⁸

To demonstrate what this “inherently spiritual nature” of the heart might feel like, Sardello leads his readers on a profound voyage of discovery into the inner chambers of their own heart. Wielding those two classic tools of inner work, attention and sensation, he teaches us how to access the heart through concentrated sensation (rather than visualization or emotion) and there discover its inherent vibrational signature as “pure intimacy...intimacy without something or someone attached to that intimacy.”⁹

I have to say I followed that exercise several times and was astonished by the results. I had experienced something of that “pure intimacy” before, as that sort of golden tenderness that sometimes surrounds a period of Centering Prayer. But never had I experienced it with such force or clarity, as a distinct inner bandwidth resonating in perfect synchrony with (in Kabir Helminski’s words) “its cosmic milieu, the infinity of love.” No wonder the embodied aspect of heart spirituality is so important! For it is only through sensation—that is, “attention concentrated in the heart”—that this experience of utter fullness and belonging becomes accessible.¹⁰

Sardello is not the only voice in the field. There is now a substantial and growing body of “bridge literature” linking classic spiritual teachings on the heart with emerging discoveries in the field of neurobiology. I have already mentioned the pioneering work of the HeartMath Institute, but I want to call attention to two other fascinating and



useful books for the spiritually adventurous nonspecialist: *THE BIOLOGY OF TRANSCENDENCE* by Joseph Chilton Pearce¹¹ and *THE SECRET TEACHING OF PLANTS* by Stephen Harrod Buhner.¹² Marshaling considerable scientific data in a format easily accessible to a lay reader, each of these books demonstrates how contemporary science has taken us far beyond the notion of the heart as a mechanical pump to revision it as “an electromagnetic generator,”¹³ working simultaneously across a range of vibrational frequencies to perform its various tasks of internal and external self-regulation and information exchange. (An “organ of spiritual perception,” after all, can be understood in this context as simply an electromagnetic generator picking up



The Weighing of the Heart from the Book of the Dead of Ani. c. 1300 B.C. British Museum

information at far subtler vibrational bandwidths.) Both books call attention, as does the HeartMath Institute, to the intricate feedback loops between heart and brain—almost as if the human being were expressly wired to facilitate this exchange, which Pearce sees as fundamentally between the universal (carried in the heart) and the particular (carried in the brain). As he expresses it, “The heart takes on the subtle individual colors of a person without losing its essential universality. It seems to mediate between our individual self and a universal process while being representative of that universal process.”¹⁴ While such bold statements may make hard-core scientists writhe, from the spiritual side of the bridge it is easily

comprehensible and brings additional confirmation that “putting the mind in the heart” is not merely a quaint spiritual metaphor but contains precise and essential information on the physiological undergirding of conscious transformation.

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

According to Western understanding, the heart does not need to be “grown” or “evolved.” Every heart is already a perfect holograph of the divine heart, carrying within itself full access to the information of the whole. But it does need to be *purified*, as Jesus himself observed. In its spiritual capacity, the

Today, the notion of “passionlessness” equates to “emotionally brain dead.” If you take away passion, what is left?

heart is fundamentally a homing beacon, allowing us to stay aligned with those “emanations from more subtle levels of existence” Helminski refers to, and hence to follow the authentic path of our own unfolding. But when the signals get jammed by the interference of lower-level noise, then it is no longer able to do its beaconing work.

Unanimously, the Christian wisdom tradition proclaims that the source of this lower-level noise is “the passions.” As the *PHILOKALIA* repeatedly emphasizes, the problem with the passions is that they *divide the heart*.¹⁵ A heart that is divided, pulled this way and that by competing inner agendas, is like a wind-tossed sea: unable to reflect on its surface the clear image of the moon.

Here again is a teaching that tends to set contemporary people’s teeth on edge. I know this from personal experience, because the issue comes up at nearly every workshop I give. To our modern Western way of hearing, “passion” is a good thing: something akin to *élan vital*, the source of our aliveness and motivation. It is to be encouraged, not discouraged. At a recent workshop I led, a bishop approached me with some concern and explained that in his diocese, following the recommendations of a church consultant, he had managed to boost morale and productivity by significant percentages simply by encouraging his clergy “to follow their passions.”

Well-nigh universally today, the notion of “passionlessness” (a quality

eagerly sought after in the ancient teachings of the desert fathers and mothers) equates to “emotionally brain dead.” If you take away passion, what is left?

So once again we have to begin with some decoding.

If you consult any English dictionary, you will discover that the word “passion” comes from the Latin verb *patior*, which means “to suffer” (*passio* is the first-person singular). But this still doesn’t get us all the way, because the literal, now largely archaic, meaning of the verb “to suffer” (to “undergo or experience”) is literally *to be acted upon*. The chief operative here is the involuntary and mechanical aspect of the transaction. And according to the traditional wisdom teachings, it is precisely that involuntary and mechanical aspect of being “grabbed” that leads to suffering in the sense of how we use the term today. Thus, in the ancient insights on which this spiritual teaching rests, passion did not mean *élan vital*, energy, or aliveness. It designated being stuck, grabbed, and blindly reactive.

This original meaning is clearly uppermost in the powerful teaching of the fourth-century desert father Evagrius Ponticus. Sometimes credited with being the first spiritual psychologist in the Christian West, Evagrius developed a marvelously subtle teaching on the progressive nature of emotional entanglement, a teaching that would eventually bear fruit in the fully



Madonna and child. Saint Augustinus Church, Miguel Hidalgo, Federal District, Mexico

articulated doctrine of the seven deadly sins. His core realization was that when the first stirrings of what will eventually become full-fledged passionate outbursts appear on the screen of consciousness, they begin as “thoughts”—*logismoi*, in his words—streams of associative logic following well-conditioned inner tracks. At first they are merely that—“thought-loops,” mere flotsam on the endlessly moving river of the mind. But at some point a thought-loop will entrain with one’s sense of identity—an emotional value or point of view is suddenly at stake—and then one is hooked. A passion is born, and the emotions spew forth. Thomas Keating has marvelously repackaged this ancient teaching in his diagram of the life cycle of an emotion,¹⁶ a core part of his Centering Prayer teaching. This diagram makes clear that once the emotion is engaged, once that sense of “I” locks in, what follows is a full-scale emotional uproar—which then, as Father Keating points out, simply drives the syndrome deeper and deeper into the unconscious, where it

becomes even more involuntary and mechanically triggered.

What breaks the syndrome? For Evagrius, liberation lies in *an increasingly developed inner capacity to notice when a thought is beginning to take on emotional coloration and to nip it in the bud before it becomes a passion by dis-identifying or disengaging from it*. This is the essence of the teaching that has held sway in our tradition for more than a thousand years.

Now, of course, there are various ways of going about this disengaging. Contemporary psychology has added the important qualifier that disengaging is not the same thing as *repressing* (which is simply sweeping the issue under the psychological rug) and has developed important methodologies for allowing people to become consciously present to and “own” the stew fermenting within them. But it must also be stated that “owning” does not automatically entail either “acting out” or verbally “expressing” that emotional uproar. Rather, the genius of the earlier tradition has been to insist that if one

can merely back the identification out—that sense of “me,” stuck to a fixed frame of reference or value—then the energy being co-opted and squandered in useless emotional turmoil can be recaptured at a higher level to strengthen the intensity and clarity of heart perceptivity. Rather than fueling the “reactive ego-self,” the energy can be “rejoined to its cosmic milieu, the infinity of love.” And that, essentially, constitutes the goal of purification—at least as it has been understood in service of conscious transformation.

EMOTION VERSUS FEELING

Here again, we have an important clarification contributed by Robert Sardello. Echoing the classic understanding of the Christian Inner tradition (I first encountered this teaching in the Gurdjieff Work), Sardello points out that most of us use the terms “feeling” and “emotion” interchangeably, as if they are synonyms. They are not. Emotion is technically “stuck” feeling, feeling bound to a fixed point of view or fixed reference point. “We are not free in our emotional life,” he points out, since emotion always “occurs quite automatically as a reaction to something that happens to us.”¹⁷ It would correspond to what Helminski calls “the heart in service to the reactive ego-self.”

Beyond this limited sphere opens up a vast reservoir of feelingness. Here the currents run hard and strong, always tinged with a kind of multivalence in which the hard-and-fast boundaries distinguishing one emotion from another begin to blend together.



Gravestone, Jewish Cemetery, Olesno, Poland

Happiness is tinged with sadness, grief touches at its bottomless depths the mysterious upwelling of comfort, loneliness is suffused with intimacy, and the deep ache of yearning for the absent beloved becomes the paradoxical sacrament of presence. “For beauty is only the beginning of a terror we can just scarcely bear,” observes Rilke, “and the reason we adore it so is that it serenely disdains to destroy us.”¹⁸

Such is the sensation of the heart beginning to swim in those deeper waters, awakening to its birthright as an organ of spiritual perception. And it would stand to reason, of course, that the experience is feeling-ful because that is the heart’s *modus operandi*; it gains information by entering the inside of things and coming into resonance with them. But this is feeling of an entirely different order, no longer affixed to a personal self-center, but flowing in holographic union with that which can always and only flow, the great dynamism of love. “Feeling as a form of knowing”¹⁹ becomes the pathway of this

*As one is able to release the heart
from its enslavement to the passions,
this other heart emerges:
of luminous sight and compassionate action.*

other mode of perceptivity, more intense, but strangely familiar and effortless.

The great wager around which the Western Inner tradition has encamped is that as one is able to release the heart from its enslavement to the passions, this other heart emerges: this “organ of contemplation,” of luminous sight and compassionate action. For what one “sees” and entrains with is none other than this higher order of divine coherence and compassion, which can be verified as objectively *real*, but becomes accessible only when the heart is able to rise to this highest level and assume its cosmically appointed function. Then grace upon grace flows through this vibrating reed and on out into a transfigured world: transfigured by the very grace of being bathed in this undivided light.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” In this one sentence, the whole of the teaching is conveyed. What remains is for us to come to a greater understanding of how this purification is actually accomplished: a critical issue on which Christian tradition is by no means unanimous. This will be the subject of our next chapter. **I**

¹ Kabir Helminski, *LIVING PRESENCE: A SUFI GUIDE TO MINDFULNESS AND THE ESSENTIAL SELF* (New York: Tarcher/Perigree Books, 1992), 157.

² *Ibid.*, 158.

³ Sidney H. Griffith, “Merton, Massignon, and the

Challenge of Islam,” in Rob Barker and Gray Henry, eds., *MERTON AND SUFISM: THE UNTOLD STORY* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 65.

⁴ For extensive bibliographical information on this work, see “A Treatise on the Heart,” trans. Nicholas Heer, (*ibid.*, 79–88).

⁵ E. Kadloubovsky and E. M. Palmer, eds., *THE ART OF PRAYER: AN ORTHODOX ANTHOLOGY* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 194.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁷ Robert Sardello, *SILENCE: THE MYSTERY OF WHOLENES* (Benson, NC: Goldenstone Press, 2006), 82.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁰ No wonder the embodied aspect of heart spirituality is so important! For if Sardello is right here (and my own work confirms that he is), then the stunning conclusion is that *there is no lack*. That primordial hunger for intimacy and belonging we so frantically project onto others in our attempt to find fulfillment is *fulfilled already*, there in the “infinity of love” already residing holographically in our own hearts, once we have truly learned to attune to its frequency and trust that with which it reverberates. In this sense, our physical heart is the quintessential “treasure buried in the field.”

¹¹ Joseph Chilton Pearce, *THE BIOLOGY OF TRANSCENDENCE: A BLUEPRINT OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Place, 2002).

¹² Stephen Harrod Buhner, *THE SECRET TEACHINGS OF PLANTS: THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE HEART IN THE DIRECT PERCEPTION OF NATURE* (Rochester, VT: Bear and Company, 2004).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁴ Pearce, 64–65.

¹⁵ For a particularly clear and forceful discussion of this point, see E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer, trans., *UNSEEN WARFARE*, trans. E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987), 241–44.

¹⁶ Reproduced in Cynthia Bourgeault, *CENTERING PRAYER AND INNER AWAKENING* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2004), 136.

¹⁷ Sardello, 72.

¹⁸ Rainer Maria Rilke, *DUINO ELEGIES*, trans. J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1939), 21.

¹⁹ Sardello, 72.

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Photograph by Benjamin Balázs



Finding the light in the darkest of times

In the Midst of Winter, an Invincible Summer

Tracy Cochran

MY DAUGHTER ALEX ONCE PUT HER BIKE out on our Brooklyn street for any stranger to take. She made a sign saying “Free bike! Please enjoy!” in purple crayon, adding a bold smiley face. I helped her carry the bike down the steep steps of our brownstone and place it under the streetlight, the sign taped to the seat.

Lying in bed that night, her face shone with happy anticipation. Things appeared and disappeared on the street all the time, but it was different being part of it. In a way, this was what I wanted her to understand: meaning is an action; we make meaning through our actions. You exist in a web of life: this was the message. You are part of nature and part of the human community. And when you give, you receive something.

A good friend of mine once told me that her father took her and the other kids in the family to Coney Island to look at the rides through a fence. To an adult, observing other people riding the Cyclone or the Wonder Wheel may have seemed a clever money-saving move, almost as good as the real thing, even preferable: people don’t die watching roller coasters. To the children, of course, it wasn’t even close.



Photograph by Susornpol Joe Watanachote

my

Some truths must be lived. I knew this, even though I spent a lot of time reading and thinking about life. The aspiration, beyond recycling a little purple bike with training wheels that was outgrown, was to kindle something in Alex: an interest in the great exchange that is always happening in life, a sense of being part of it. I could barely find words for it, and I was far from being a role model of engagement. I was an over-thinker, an observer. The hope was that if all the elements came together, the action in the street, the larger idea, there might be fire.

The next morning Alex clambered down the steps from her loft bed and flung open the drapes of the big windows in the living room. She whirled around, her face as radiant as if it was Christmas morning. The bike was gone! We marveled together, although we were marveling at different things. I was marveling at having given birth to a child who seemed to take joy in giving without knowing who might benefit, who seemed to delight in being part of the dance of life. Incredibly, in spite of

own doubts and major flaws, I seemed to have pulled off something amazing.

“Now, when do I get something back?” she asked, her big eyes without guile. I had no answer. It was as if a curtain was drawn back, revealing a blank wall. Alex was asking profound questions, and I shared them: is the universe benevolent? How can we begin to understand our relationship to this life?

“Be patient with all that is unsolved in your heart,” writes Rilke. “And try to love the questions themselves. Do not seek the answers, which cannot be given to you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions.”

The thinking mind hates this kind of suggestion. It wants to know. It wants to lift itself up above our flowing, changing, moment-by-moment experience, the world of the body and its perceptions and feelings. It wants us to be someone, and it wants life to be predictable and within our control. But our Brooklyn neighborhood gentrified, and our brownstone sold to a Wall

Some truths can only be experienced: the ground giving way beneath our feet is one.

Street investor and his young wife, who brought an architect into our apartment to discuss massive renovations as I sat at my desk, trying to work.

We moved to northern Westchester. Alexandra grieved for the life and diversity of Brooklyn, withdrawing into the world of *HARRY POTTER* and *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*, spending hours online with friends who shared her interests. I made a stab at gardening, hoping to soothe and ground us in our new life, to bring a happy little kid back to me by bringing her in touch with the earth.

Stab is the correct word for the effort I made, brief and blunt. Only if a person were blind and drunk and working without tools could they get muddier than I even when I was just transplanting a few flowers. Reluctantly, Alex joined me a few times, wandering outside wearing rubber boots and pajama bottoms, trailing a trowel as if she were joining a chain gang.

Alex complained that everything about the digging and the planting went slowly. I told her that the work and the pace were the same for our earliest ancestors, but I knew this couldn't be true. They would have starved if they had farmed this way. Alex said she didn't like pretending we were "back in ancestral times." I didn't blame her. We were not our ancestors and we couldn't know what they knew.

There are truths that cannot be known by outside observation, by

superficial efforts, by quick stabs. What drove me to keep trying to teach what I didn't understand? I wanted Alex to feel welcome on the earth. I wanted to teach her to be strong and have hope, but it seemed we were all being swept along passively by time and circumstance.

"Hope is not a form of guarantee," writes the critic John Berger. "It's a form of energy, and very frequently that energy is strongest in circumstances that are very dark."

Within the year, a super storm flooded the downstairs and washed the garden beds away. I ran around the house in the middle of the night, on my way to the basement to save boxes of pictures and diplomas and other items. The seemingly solid ground turned to liquid mud. Some truths can only be experienced: the ground giving way beneath our feet is one.

Life is always in movement and always uncertain. Yet deeper truths are revealed when we need them; doors open from the inside. I learned this one December, in the international arrival terminal of JFK airport in New York. It had been a long and difficult trip, and I pictured snuggling safely into the car and soon my own warm bed, a returning warrior, battered but enriched by my experiences. I reached my hand into the bag and that bubble burst. Somewhere between the baggage claim and the car, my wallet had disappeared.

I took everything out of my bag and examined the interior, and then I did it



again, unwilling to accept the gaping absence of something that felt so essential to my sense of security. I cycled through the expected reactions: panic and disbelief, the desperate hope that some honest citizen had turned the wallet in, then rage and self-blame about little things, that psychic cutting technique we use to ward off the greater pain of feeling vulnerable. I picked on little details. Why did I stand in such a crowded place to retrieve my suitcase? Why didn't I wait?

Home from the airport, after a flurry of phone calls, I lay in bed in the dark, wrestling with the dark angel of the deeper why. Why was I so careless? A chorus of witch-like voices chimed in: *you've always been this way*. I felt like a blind and wounded giant lurching around breaking things inside. Why hadn't I gone ahead and bought that ridiculously expensive sweater or that expensive scotch or that age-reversing face cream I saw in the duty-free shop? It would have

been better than just losing all that money to dark unseen forces, wouldn't it? I was in no state to remember the night I had urged Alex to give her little purple bike to the universe, but the contrast was crazy. How could I trust in the goodness of life?

In spite of all of our care and precaution, life is unpredictable and subject to change. Our sense of security and control is mostly an illusion. No matter how hard we try to be safe and achieve and become someone in this world, life is uncertainty, and we are wavering creatures. There will be unexpected changes at the last moment. There will be loss.

"Security is mostly a superstition," writes Helen Keller. "It does not exist in nature nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing."



Newgrange. Photograph by young shanahan

I lost the wallet during the darkest time of year in the Northern Hemisphere, days before the Winter Solstice, the day when the North Pole is tilted farthest from the sun. Our ancient ancestors noted that darkest day, watching the stars and noticing the shortening days, patiently abiding until one day, they noticed a shift: the darkest day was followed by a little more light.

In Newgrange, in the east of Ireland, there is a mysterious Neolithic monument, a huge circular mound with a passageway and interior chambers. Tests reveal that it was built in 3200 B.C.E., which makes it older than the pyramids in Giza and older than Stonehenge. No one can say exactly what it is for, a tomb, a place of rituals. But here is where it gets extraordinary: it was built so that the light of the rising sun on the Winter Solstice, on December 21, floods the chamber. Just as the sun rises, sunlight pours through an opening above the main entrance, shining along the passage and

illuminating a carving of a triple spiral on the front wall.

I have often imagined how it must have been to gather in that chamber five thousand years ago, how dark it must have been before dawn in a world lit only by fire. Why did these ancient ancestors undertake such a vast and exacting project? Some researchers speculate that they were ritually capturing the sun on the shortest day, as if they were children capable of little more than magical thinking. But the engineering and astronomy required to build Newgrange refutes this. It is a monument to attention and faith.

Lying in bed the night of the wallet, finally exhausted from all my thinking, I thought about this extraordinary feat. It seemed amazing to me that these ancient people could stay open and observing that way in all weather, going on being with life without rushing to conclusion. Left to its own devices, the ordinary thinking mind tends towards pessimism. The light will never return, it

*We make ourselves available to life, opening
our hearts...knowing we will blunder
and get it wrong but sometimes right.*

tells us; it is always darkest before it is pitch black: that kind of grim prediction.

A shift occurs when the thinking mind emerges from its self-enclosed isolation and re-enters the world through the perceptions and feelings of the body. Most of the time we modern people treat the body as if it is little more than a mute animal that carries us around. We dress it and feed it and sometimes buy expensive moisturizer for the poor thing but mostly it disappoints us, even as it tries to serve us as loyally as a good dog.

The trip that landed me in JFK had been a visit to my now grown daughter Alex, educated, married, and living in England. How do these changes happen? Often during the trip, I looked at my jet-lagged face in the mirror, bewildered by what I saw: who was this older-looking woman with the vaguely worried look in her eyes? Most of us feel we are not enough somehow, not quick enough or somehow substantial enough. Life sweeps us along, and it often seems there is no solid ground.

In Buddhism, a definition of faith is the ability to keep our hearts open in the darkness of the unknown. The root of the word *patience* is a Latin verb for “suffer,” which in the ancient sense meant to hold, not to grasp but to bear, to tolerate without pushing away. Being patient doesn’t mean being passive. It means being attentive, willing to be available to what is happening, going on seeing, noticing

how things change. When we aren’t wishing for something to be over, or when we aren’t freezing around an idea about what it is we are seeing, we see and hear more. We notice that nature has cycles, that each day is not the same length and quality, and that darkness passes.

We don’t have the same close connection to nature that our ancient ancestors had but we have the same bodies and hearts and minds, the same capacity for attention with faith. The Buddha described the experience of enlightenment in many different ways, including being forgiven our debts and experiencing the breaking of a fever. A Zen master once explained that enlightenment happens in small moments, many times. These moments tend to come when we stop fighting reality, when we relax and open. This state of opening is also called liberation, and it often comes in the midst of what we think of as failure and crushing disappointment.

We each find the deeper truths in our time and own way. We find them as we learn to observe from the inside. In England, my daughter and her husband drove me to visit the sets of the Harry Potter films. It was a pilgrimage to a modern Newgrange, a monument to the work that showed young Alex the magical potential of life, the way the light gets in no matter how dark. J.K. Rowling, author of the *HARRY POTTER* series, once told a graduating class of Harvard that failure was the bedrock

upon which she built her real life. Failing utterly by worldly standards granted her the freedom to strip her life down to the essentials, to tell the story of a lonely boy who, unknown to himself, was really a wizard.

Lying in bed that night, I remembered that the Buddha also believed he was a failure. Alone on a riverbank, split off from his yogi brothers, he broke his vows and took food offered by a young woman. Nourished by this simple act of kindness, he remembered a simple time from childhood. He had sat alone under a rose apple tree, watching his father and other men from his village plow the fields for spring planting. Peaceful and happy, with no adults bothering him, he could be open and attentive to life as it flowed around him.

“Heaven and Earth give themselves,” teaches the twentieth-century Japanese Zen master Kodo Sawaki. “Air, water, plants, animals, and humans give themselves to each other. It is in this giving-themselves-to-each-other that we actually live.”

The boy Buddha also saw insect families tossed about by the plowing and felt a pang of compassion. He took this impression of equanimity, of being open to the flow of life, to joy and sorrow and all that arises, under the Bodhi tree. This memory of being kind and humble and selfless, just a little kid sitting under a tree, became the bedrock of his enlightenment.

At about 1 a.m. on the night I lost my wallet, the iPhone on the bedside table lit up. A band of light flashed across the screen in the dark, a message from my daughter in England. *Mom, I'm so sorry this happened to you.* In the light of day and in smooth times, such a

message would be no big deal, nice words. But that night it was a candle in the darkness. The eye barely registers the light of a candle in broad daylight but on a dark night it can be seen a long way, shining out as a reminder that there was still warmth and benevolence in the world, the possibility of companionship and kindness here in the midst of it all.

I felt a little blip of love and gratitude. I thanked her and another little message flashed back. It was a trifling exchange, complete with emoticons, yet it felt wiser and more alive than the dire and dramatic racket in my head. Once when she was younger, I told my daughter that it was more important to be kind than to be right. Now I realized that kindness is also wise.

Lying in bed in the dark, watching my iPhone light up, it dawned on me that the meaning of life, the real purpose of our presence here, is being attentive, being willing to go on seeing and keeping our hearts open—not just for our sake but for the sake of others. We make ourselves available to life, opening our hearts to the passing flow of it, knowing we will blunder and get it wrong but sometimes right. We do this even knowing that those hearts will inevitably break because life is uncertainty and change and loss. But sometimes when we are open, light floods the darkest chamber.

“In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger, something better, pushing right back.” – Albert Camus ■



Photograph by James Douglas



How to Reach Where You Already Are

Alan Watts

**Previously unpublished commentary
from a pioneer of East–West spirituality**

SO, HOW CAN AN INDIVIDUAL REALIZE THAT THEY ARE THE UNIVERSAL SELF? In what way can a person who is under the impression that they are a separate individual enclosed in a bag of skin effectively realize that they are Brahman? This, of course, is a curious question. It proposes a journey to the place where you already are. Now, it's true that you may not know that you are there, but you are. And if you take a journey to the place where you are, you will visit many other places than the place where you are, and perhaps when you find through some long experience that all the places you go to are not the place you wanted to find, it may occur to you that you were already there in the beginning. And that is the Dharma, or “method,” as I prefer to translate the word. That's the method that all gurus and spiritual teachers fundamentally use. So, they are all tricksters.

*We are afraid here and now to see the truth.
And if we had the nerve—you know, real
nerve—we'd see it right away.*

Why use *trickster* as a word to describe them? Did you know that it's terribly difficult to surprise yourself on purpose? Somebody else has to do it for you, which is why a guru or teacher is so often necessary. And there are many kinds of gurus, but among human gurus there are square gurus and beat gurus. Square gurus take you through the regular channels; beat gurus lead you in by means that are very strange indeed—they are rascals. Also, friends can act as gurus. And then there are gurus who aren't people, like situations or books. Regardless, the guru's job is to show the inquirer in some effective way that they are already what they are looking for.

In Hindu traditions, realizing who you really are is called *Sadhana*, which means “discipline.” *Sadhana* is the way of life that is necessary to follow in order to escape from the illusion that you are merely a skin encapsulated ego. *Sadhana* comprises yoga, which has the Sanskrit root *yuj*, which means “to join,” and it is from this root that we have the English words *yoke*, *junction*, and *union*. Strictly speaking, yoga means “the state of union”—the state in which the individual self, the *jivatman*, finds that it is ultimately atman. So a yogi is someone who has realized that union. But normally yoga as a word isn't used that way; it's normally used to describe a practice of meditation whereby one comes into the state of union, and in that sense a yogi is a traveler or seeker who is on the way to that union. Of course, strictly speaking, there is no

method to arrive at the place where you already are. No amount of searching will uncover the self, because all searching implies the absence of the self—the big self, the Self with a capital S. So to seek it is to thrust it away. And to practice a discipline to attain it is to postpone realization.

There's a famous Zen story of a monk sitting in meditation. The master comes along and asks, “What are you doing?” And the monk replies, “Oh, I'm meditating so I can become a Buddha.” Well, the master sits down nearby, picks up a brick, and starts rubbing it. And the monk asks, “What are you doing?” The master says, “Oh, I'm rubbing this brick to make it into a mirror.” And the monk says, “No amount of rubbing a brick can turn it into a mirror.” To which the master replies, “And no amount of zazen will turn you into a Buddha.” They don't like this story very much in modern day Japan.

Suppose I were to tell you that you, right now, are the great Self—the Brahman. Now, you might feel somewhat sympathetic to this idea intellectually, but you don't really feel it. You're looking for a way to feel it—a practice for getting there. But you don't *really* want to feel it; you're frightened of it. So you get this or that practice so you can put it off, so that you can feel that you have a long way to go, and maybe after you've suffered enough, *then* you can realize you are the atman. Why put it off? Because we are brought

up in a social scheme that tells us we have to deserve what we get, and the price to pay for all good things is suffering. But all of that is mere postponement. We are afraid here and now to see the truth. And if we had the nerve—you know, real nerve—we'd see it right away. But that's when we immediately feel that we shouldn't have nerve like that, because it would be awful. After all, we're supposed to feel like a poor little me who has to work and work and suffer in order to become something far away and great, like a Buddha or *Jivanmukta*—someone who becomes liberated.

So you can suffer for it. There are all kinds of ways invented for you to do this. You can discipline yourself and gain control of your mind and do all sorts of extraordinary things—like drink water in through your rectum and push a peanut up a mountain with your nose. There are all sorts of accomplishments you can engage in. But they have absolutely nothing to do with the realization of the self. The realization of the self fundamentally depends on coming off it, just as when someone is putting on some kind of act and we say, “Oh, come off it.” And some people can come off it—they laugh, because they suddenly realize they've been making a fool of themselves.

So that's the job of the trickster—the guru, the teacher—to help you come off it. And to this end, the guru will come up with all sorts of exercises to get you to come off it. And maybe after you get enough discipline and frustration and suffering, you'll finally give it all up and realize that you were there from the beginning and there was nothing to realize in the first place. See, the guru is

very clever. They don't go out on the streets and preach and tell you that you need to be converted—they sit down under a tree and wait. And people start coming around and bringing their problems and propositions to the guru, and the guru answers and challenges you in whatever way they think is appropriate to your situation. Now, if you've got a thin shell and your mask is easily dispatched with, the guru uses the easy method. They'll say, “Come off it, Shiva! Stop pretending you're this guy here. I know who you are!” But most people won't respond to that. Most people have very thick shells, so the guru has to invent ways of cracking those shells.

To understand yoga, you should read Patañjali—the *Yoga Sutras*. There are so many translations, and I'm not sure which is the best. This sutra begins, “Now yoga is explained.” That's the first verse, and the commentators say that “now” in this context carries the meaning that you're supposed to know other material beforehand. Specifically, you're supposed to be a civilized human being before you begin yoga—you're supposed to have been disciplined in Artha, Kama, and Dharma. You're supposed to have engaged in politics, the arts of sensuality, and justice before you can begin yoga. The next verse is “Yogash chitta vritti nirodha,” which means “Yoga is the cessation of revolutions of the mind,” and this can mean many things—stop the waves of the mind, attain a perfectly calm mind, stop thinking entirely, or even eliminate all contents from the mind. How can you do that? Well, the sutra goes on to give you particular steps:



Photograph by Arushi Saini.
Gujarat, India

pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, and samadhi.

Pranayama means controlling the breath, pratyahara refers to preliminary concentration, dharana is a more intense form of concentration, dhyana—the same dhyana from which the word Zen comes—means profound union between subject and object, and then there's samadhi—the attainment of non-dualistic consciousness. See what's happening here? First, you learn to control your breath. And breathing is a very strange thing, because breathing can be viewed both as a voluntary *and* involuntary action. You can feel that you breathe and yet you can also feel that breathing breathes you. And there are all sorts of fancy ways to breathe in yoga which are very amusing to practice, because you can get quite high on them. So this sutra sets you up with all sorts of tricks and if you are bright you may begin to realize some things at this point.

But if you are not very bright, you'll have to go on to work on concentration. You learn to concentrate the mind on one point. Now, this can be an absolutely fascinating undertaking. Here's one way to try it out: find some bright, polished surface—say, on copper or glass or something—and select on it some reflection of light. Now, look at it and put your eyes out of focus so that the bright spot appears to be fuzzy, like a fuzzy circle. You'll see a definite pattern of blur and you'll have a wonderful time looking at that. Then get your eyes back into focus and look at an intense light and go deep into it, like falling down a funnel and at the end of the funnel is this

intense light. Just go in and in an in—it's a most thrilling experience.

So you're doing this kind of practice when the guru suddenly wakes you up. And they say, "What are you looking at that light for?" And you stammer something about wanting realization because we live in a world in which we identify ourselves with the ego and we therefore get into trouble and suffer. And the guru asks, "Well, are you afraid of that?" And you respond, "Yes." Well, then the guru points out to you that all you're doing is practicing yoga out of fear—you're just escaping and running away. And how far do you think you can get into realization through fear? So then you think, "Well, now I've got to practice yoga, but not with a fearful motive." And all the while, the guru is watching you. They're a highly sensitive person, and they know exactly what you're doing—they know exactly what your motive is. So they put you onto the kick of getting a pure motive, which means getting a very deep control of your emotions. So you try not to have impure thoughts. You try and try and maybe manage to repress as many impure thoughts as possible and then one day the guru asks, "Why are you repressing your thoughts? What's your motive here?" And then you find out that you had an impure motive for trying to have a pure mind. You did it for the same old reason. From the very beginning you were afraid, because you wanted to play one-up on the universe.

Eventually you see how crazy your mind is. It can only go in circles. Everything your mind does to get out of the trap puts it more securely in the trap. Every step toward liberation ties you up even more. You started with molasses in one hand and feathers in the

*How do you get people to trust life?
You have to trick them.
They won't jump into the water,
so you have to throw them in.*

other, and the guru made you clap your hands together and then told you to pick the feathers off. And the more you try to do so, the more mess you make. Meanwhile, as you get more and more involved in this curious process, the guru tells you how you're progressing. "You attained the 8th stage today. Congratulations. Now you only have 56 steps remaining." And when you get to that 64th stage, the guru knows how to spin it and drag it all out, because you are ever so hopeful that you'll get that thing, just as you might win a prize or win a special job or great distinction and finally be somebody. That your motivation all along, only it's very spiritual here. It's not for worldly recognition, but you want to be recognized by the gods and angels—it's the same story on a higher level.

So the guru keeps holding out all these baits and the student keeps taking the bait. And the guru holds out more baits until the student gets the realization that they're just running around faster and faster in a squirrel cage. I mean, the student is making an enormous amount of progress, but they're not getting anywhere. And this is how the guru tricks you. The guru impresses this realization upon you by these methods until you finally find out that you—as an ego, as what you ordinarily call your mind—are a mess. And you just can't do this thing. You can't do it by any of the means that have

been presented to you. You can now concentrate, yes, but you discover you've been concentrating for the wrong reason, and there's no way of doing it for the right reason.

Krishnamurti did this to people. He was a very clever guru. And Gurdjieff, too, although he played the same game in a different way. He made his students watch themselves constantly and told them to never, never be absentminded. And the Japanese sword teachers do the same thing. Their first lesson is to always be alert—constantly—because you never know where or when the attack is going to come. Now, do you know what happens when you try to always be on the alert? You think about being alert—you're not alert. And you're a hopeless prey to the enemy. So the trick is to be simply awake and relaxed. Then all your nerve ends are working and whenever the attack comes, you're ready. The great teachers liken this to a barrel of water—the water sits there in the barrel, and as soon as you put a hole in the barrel the water just falls out. It doesn't have to think about it. In the same way, when the mind is in a proper state, it is ready to respond in any direction without any sense of being taut or anxious. And the minute anything happens, it's right there, because it didn't have to overcome anything, like coming back from the opposite direction to respond to an attack. See, if you're set for the attack to come from

over there and it comes from here, you have to pull back from there and come here, but by then it's too late. So sit in the middle and don't expect the attack to come from any particular direction.

In yoga, you can be watchful and concentrated and alert, but all that will ever teach you is what not to do—how not to use the mind. You have to just let it happen, like going to sleep. You can't try to go to sleep. It's the same with digesting your food—you can't try to digest your food. And it's the same with liberation—you have to let yourself wake up. When you find out there isn't any way of forcing it, maybe you'll stop forcing it. But most people don't believe this. They say, "Well, that won't work for me. I'm very unevolved. I'm just poor little me and if I don't force it nothing will happen." I know some people who

think they have to struggle and strain to have a bowel movement—they think they have to work to make it happen. But all of this is based on a lack of faith—not trusting life. How do you get people to trust life? You have to trick them. They won't jump into the water, so you have to throw them in. And if they're very unwilling to be thrown in, they're going to take diving lessons or read books about diving or do preliminary exercises or stand at the edge of the diving board and inquire which is the right posture until somebody comes up from behind and kicks them in the butt to get them in the water. ▮

Excerpted from *OUT OF YOUR MIND: TRICKSTERS, INDEPENDENCE, AND THE COSMIC GAME OF HIDE AND SEEK* by Alan Watts. Copyright © 2017 Alan Watts. Preface © 2017 Mark Watts. To be published by Sounds True in March 2017.



Photograph by Ben White

The Urge to Create

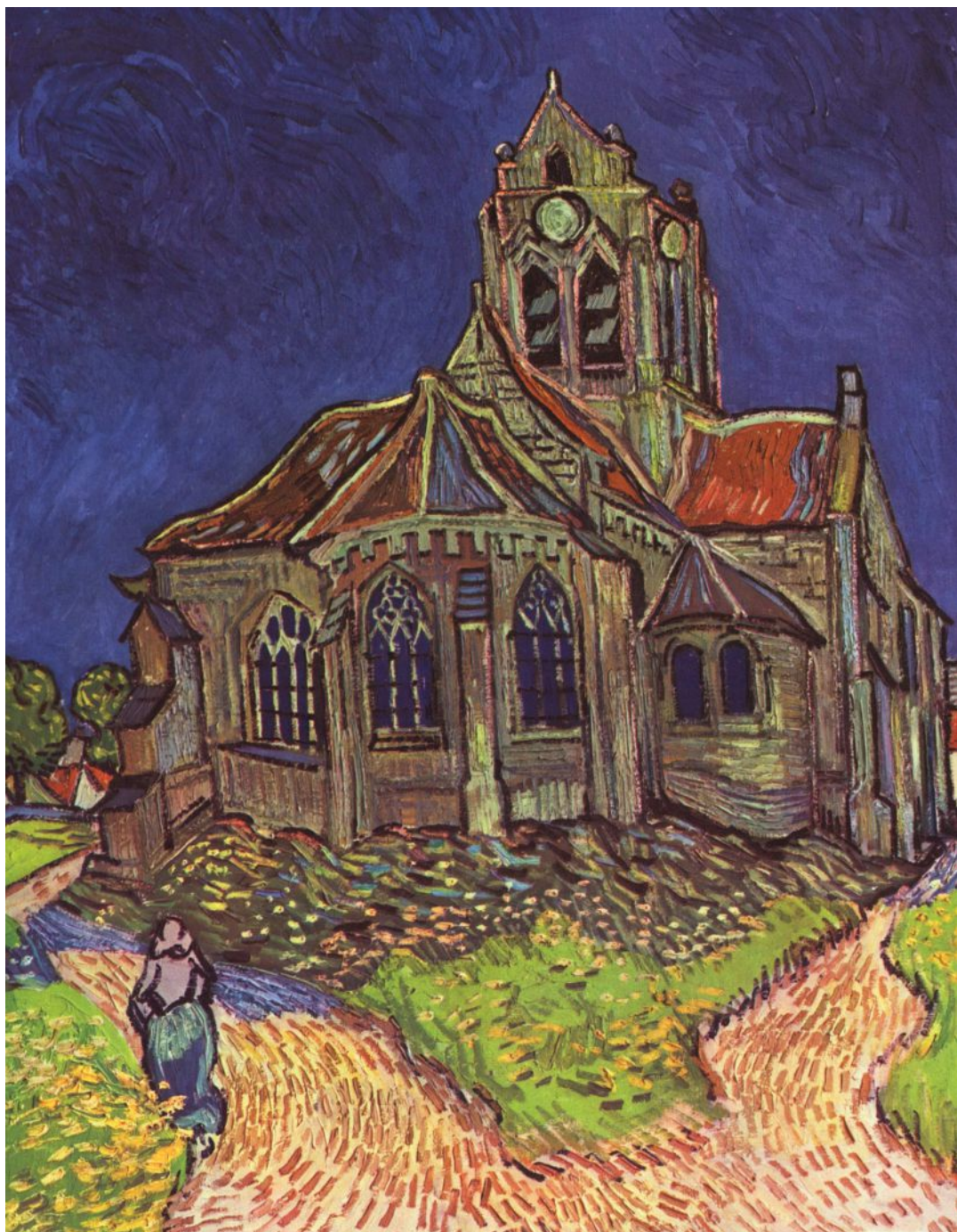
Carol Berry

How a failed pastor became the artist Vincent van Gogh

In 1879, Vincent van Gogh, with hopes of working as a pastor, lived in squalid conditions as a Protestant missionary among coal miners in the Borinage district of Belgium, until he was dismissed for “undermining the dignity of the priesthood.” A disgraced failure—his father wanted him committed to a lunatic asylum—van Gogh faced an abyss of meaninglessness. The passage below details what happened then.

—The Editors

ALONE, WITHOUT ANY TIES TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD, Vincent continued to shed the familiar, religious, and social constraints. Family connections that could have led to respectable positions were severed. He eschewed his brother’s encouraging support. He had received no approval from religious institutions for his effort to ease the miners’ lives, an effort that had taken a devastating toll on his personal health. He was weak and ill and without any support. But what he did have was his own humanity and his faith—his faith in the ray from on high (Amsterdam, April 3, 1878). With that little bit of light shining into his own pit of hell he maintained a glimmer of hope. In that cold dark place with nothing to distract him, he finally became aware of a light within his soul, a vital spark—the urge to create. He had



The Church at Auvers-sur-Oise. Vincent van Gogh. June 1890. Musée d'Orsay, Paris



The Diggers at the van Gogh House in Cuesmes. Vincent van Gogh. 1880



Coal Mine in the Borinage. Vincent van Gogh. August 1879

always had a latent desire to make sketches and drawings, which he sometimes inserted in his letters. Just before entering the Borinage he had written to Theo that he would really like to

start making rough sketches of one or the other of the many things one meets along the way, but considering that it would actually not take me very far and that it would most likely keep me from my real work, it is better I don't begin. (Laken, on or about November 13 or 15 or 16, 1878)

At the time he wrote these words, immersed in coursework required by the missionary training school, he had suppressed his longing. But now, in the cramped bedroom of the miner's hut with nothing else he could do, he took up a pencil and began to *draw far into the night, to keep some souvenir and to strengthen the thoughts raised involuntarily by the aspect of things here* (Cuesmes, August 5, 1879).

During the next eight months, by the light of a flickering candle, while the miner's children were asleep, Vincent sketched. And slowly his spirits began to rise, rekindling at the same time the passion for all the art that had fed his soul in the past. He found courage and hope, affirmation and inspiration, in the rich store of his remembrances. He had once written to Theo how rich art was, and that if one could remember the things one had seen, one would never feel alone. For almost three years he had lived in a place devoid of art, except for the few prints Theo had sent him. But this long absence from the world of literature and art hadn't dimmed his appreciation and need for it. On the contrary, that world had remained embedded within his consciousness. Vincent's love for art had made his

suffering bearable. The memory of artworks had helped him see in the darkened soot-covered world of the miners glimpses of scenes worthy of paintings. He had come to the Borinage with the ability to see with the eye of an artist. This country was unique, *everything speaks, as it were, and is full of character* (Wasmes, December 26, 1878). *Every moment there is something that moves one intensely* (Wasmes, between March 4 and 31, 1879). When he took his walks through the labyrinthine streets, lined with grimy brick houses on either side, or ventured beyond the towns where slag piles obscured the horizon, he was reminded of certain aspects and moods seen in great works of art:

There is a place nearby from where one can see in the distance below a large part of the Borinage, with the chimneys, mountains of coal, small workers' homes, the moving about of small black figures during the day just like in an ant heap, in the far distance dark fir woods with small white workers' cottages in front of them, a couple of little towers in the distance, an old mill etc. Usually a kind of fog hangs over it all, or there is the whimsical effect of light and dark because of the shadows caused by clouds that remind one of paintings by Rembrandt or Michel or Ruisdael. (Wasmes, on or about June 19, 1879)

The prints that he now hung on the walls of the miner's bedroom spurred him on. He returned to reading the books he had with him. And instead of writing letters to Theo, he relied on drawing to strengthen his thoughts and reconnect with all that had given him the greatest meaning. |

Reprinted from Carol Berry's *VINCENT VAN GOGH: HIS SPIRITUAL VISION IN LIFE AND ART* (2015) by permission of Orbis Books (www.orbisbooks.com).

Photograph by Noah Rosenfield



Ancient wisdom on how to live rightly and well

The Dao of Meaning

Dian Duchin Reed

WHO HASN'T WONDERED WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT? For me, the best pointing-at-the-moon answers can be found in the Dao De Jing, written by the Chinese sage Laozi 2,500 years ago. I've read many translations of this text over the years, and recently translated it myself, in order to come as close as possible to its underlying bones.

WEI WU WEI

One of Laozi's most compelling insights is the concept of *wei wu wei*. He's referring to the kind of effortless action that is natural and spontaneous. Literally, *wei wu wei* means doing without doing, or action without action, which may sound like a paradox at first. "Those who know," he says, "find fulfillment without effort."¹ His advice?

*Best to live without controlling,
act without expecting,
perform well without dwelling on it.*

Wei wu wei is akin to Mihaly Csíkszentmihalyi's concept of flow.² In an interview with *WIRED* magazine, Csíkszentmihalyi describes flow as "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost."³

The key to giving up—or at least stopping to question—our judgments about everything that happens is to realize that we don't have the whole picture.

Basically, Laozi's message is to do—as well as we can—whatever it is we do. Then we can move on, knowing we've done our best:

*Behave well, and never mind hiding your tracks.
Speak well, and forget about blaming your flaws.
Evaluate well, and there's no need to keep count.*

ON THE PATH

When we are practicing wei wu wei, we are on the right path (*dao*), and the traveling is easy. Taking any other path amounts to going against the flow. We find ourselves fighting life, and since we're a part of life, we can end up working against ourselves. As Laozi puts it:

*If I took what I know seriously,
I would walk on the wide path
and only act with respect.*

*Though the great path runs smooth
and safe, people keep stumbling
down shadowy byways.*

Of course, the first thing that Laozi tells his readers is that this path can't be described. The best he can do is to point at it. The best we can do is to pay attention to his hints.

When we consider ourselves separate from others and from nature, we run the risk of falling into what Jiddu

Krishnamurti calls “the daily, dull, insensitive existence, putting up with our misery, defending, quarreling, eking out our life until death comes.” What we are seeking, he says, is “a totally different existence, so that there is no division between nature and ourselves, between another and ourselves, so that there is a heightened, deepened quality and meaning to life.”

How do we get there?

Krishnamurti says, “It can only be brought about when the observer no longer makes an effort to change, because he himself is part of what he tries to change. Therefore all action on the part of the observer ceases totally, and in this total inaction there is a quite different action.”

Krishnamurti encourages us to start simply: “Can I look at a flower by the wayside or in my room without all the thoughts arising, the thought that says, ‘It is a rose; I like the smell of it, the perfume,’ and so on and on and on? Can I just observe without the observer? If you have not done this, do it, at the lowest, most simple level. It isn't really the lowest level; if you know how to do that, you have done everything.”⁴

Or, as Laozi describes it:

*Simply do, never mind about performing.
Simply engage, never mind about difficulties.
Simply taste, and forget about naming
the flavor.*

In other words, keep it simple:

*Every day you walk the path,
you subtract something.*

*Subtract and keep subtracting
in order to let things
go their own way.*

*Leave things alone;
don't impose meaning.*

When we do this, our goals are not separate from the goals of those around us:

*Those who know
don't have endless intentions. They treat
other people's intentions as their own.*

DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY

The key to giving up—or at least stopping to question—our judgments about everything that happens is to realize that we don't have the whole picture. A car cuts us off on the freeway, and we're furious. We learn that it's driven by a man who's rushing his wife to the hospital to give birth, and our fury turns into compassion. A friend ignores us in the street, and we're hurt. We learn that she's not wearing her glasses, and we understand that her vision is the issue, not our friendship. Laozi gives us this reminder:

*Best to know
that you don't know.*

*Not knowing this
is a problem.*

This may seem to pose a quandary. After all, no one is capable of knowing everything. How, then, are we to act? Fortunately, the answer is simple. The answer is in our very nature.

*No need to go out the door
to be mindful of the world.*

*No need to peer through windows
to see the right way to act.*

*The more you go out, remote and distant,
the more you know what's missing.*

*That's why those in the know
don't go anywhere but remain aware*

*of what's not visible, yet apparent.
Not seeing, they perceive.*

*Not making things happen,
they get results.*

The answer, then, lies in subtracting judgement, trusting our nature, and relaxing into effortless action:

*Oh
we do nothing.
And the universe takes care of itself.*

TAIJIQUAN AND THE ZEN CIRCLE

That most daoist of Chinese martial arts, taiji quan, provides a wonderful example of this state of mind. I perform these graceful steps in my garden first thing every morning. Over the course of thousands of mornings, I've learned that what's most valuable is the practice of performing one step at a time, with nothing added. The body does what it does, while thoughts come and go freely, and the senses process the world. It's a moving meditation. It's *wei wu wei* in (effortless) action.

Another example of *wei wu wei* is the *enso* (or circle) of Zen Buddhist calligraphy. This evocative circle results from one or two effortless brushstrokes made by a hand that's not seeking perfection.

How different life would be if we stopped labeling our experiences. If we simply lived life instead.

In fact, seeking perfection can be counter-productive. “Have no fear of perfection—you'll never reach it,” said Salvador Dali. Yet for those of us who keep reaching for perfection, the accompanying fear of failure can be crippling. No one can avoid failure, but at the same time, perhaps failure is also nothing to fear. Here again, Laozi has good advice:

*According to those who know, problems persist;
so, in the end, never mind about problems.*

Maybe the real problem lies in the labeling. What is failure, really? As Thomas A. Edison noted about his own experiments, “I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.” How different life would be if we stopped labeling our experiences. If we simply lived life instead.

LIVING A MEANINGFUL LIFE

One conclusion to draw is that it's more fruitful to live a meaningful life than to try to describe the meaning of life. Another way to put this is that the meaning of life can be found in how we live our life. The Peace Prayer, for example, describes what a meaningful life might look like:

*Please,
Make me an instrument of your Peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;*

*Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.*

*Grant that I may not seek so much
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love.*

*For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
It is in dying to the self that we are born to
eternal life.*

Each life is unique, important, a piece of the puzzle. What each of us does is important, and at the same time—on the scale of the universe—insignificant. In the words of Suzuki Roshi, “What we are doing here is so important, we better not take it too seriously!”

When not taking things too seriously, a person can accomplish a lot, as Laozi tells us:

*Those who know
advise taking nothing as important.
That way
you can accomplish important things.*

A bookmark I used to own offered another paradox, in beautiful calligraphy: “There is plenty of time, and each moment counts.”

This particular moment is only one of an infinite number of moments. Each person alive right now is only one of seven billion humans on the planet. And yet, doesn't everything affect everything else? The single flap of a butterfly's wings can alter the timing and path of a hurricane half a world away. Of course, the butterfly is



Daoist philosopher Liezi. Zhang Lu.
Ink on gold-flecked paper, early
sixteenth century. Shanghai Museum

simply floating around, taking no notice of how its flapping might affect the air currents around it, not worrying about the enormity of what it might be setting in motion.

The takeaway? The more we worry, the more we fear failure, the less we are in touch with our true nature. The story of Rabbi Zusha is a good example of this. His students came to visit him on his deathbed and found him with tears in his eyes. Surprised, they asked him what was wrong. He replied, “When I die, I know I won’t be asked why I wasn’t more like Moses. But I am afraid

that I’ll be asked why I wasn’t more like Zusha.”

Following the path that is truly ours may very well be the easiest—and the hardest—thing we can do. **I**

¹ All quotes from the *Dao De Jing* are from the author’s translation: Laozi, trans. Dian Duchin Reed, *DAO DE JING: LAOZI’S TIMELESS WISDOM* (Soquel: Humanitas Press, 2016).

² Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *FLOW: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

³ Geirland, John, “Go With The Flow,” interview with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. *WIRED*, 4.09. September, 1996.

⁴ Jiddu Krishnamurti, Second Talk in Saanen, Switzerland, 1966.

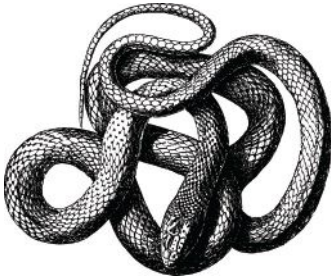
Handling serpents at the Pentecostal Church of God. September 15, 1946.
Photograph by Russell Lee. Lejunior, Harlan County, Kentucky



A tale of snake handlers, faith healers, and speakers in tongues

The Turn of the Dial: Seeking God in the Fringes

Susan Ishmael



And these signs shall follow them that believe: In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues. They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

Mark 16:17-18

IN EASTERN KENTUCKY IN THE 1970s, roadside snake pits were a common curiosity.

From Montgomery County to Powell and into Estill, the country roads wound into deep forest and low Appalachian Mountains. We'd watch for the signs—my sisters and I—hand-painted or stenciled wooden boards with the words “SNAKES” or sometimes, “REPTILES.” We'd beg our mother to stop. On occasion she would, and we'd run from pit to pit, shrieking in a terror that was only partial play. My memory is hazy when I attempt to conjure the image of the snake pits: the bright green summer leaves of tall trees; my mother, shaking her head and laughing; the snake man, telling us in his deep holler drawl about each reptile in his charge. I've heard that these pits are still there. Eastern Kentucky teems with venomous snakes. It only makes sense that they're gathered together for a greater purpose.

I'd seen enough healings...to know at a young age that people would do just about anything to get right with the Lord.

Growing up, on Wednesday nights Mom would take us to Faith Full Gospel Church. It was a church that was really a two-story clapboard house out in the country, and the services were held in what I suppose was the former living room. The bathroom had an antiquated slide lock I never trusted, and you entered and exited the church through a slamming metal kitchen door. I liked going to Faith, because sometimes the preacher would let me shake the tambourine, and there was always a lot happening at once, unlike our Sunday mornings at the First Baptist. These services were all about noise: loud, twangy, and lively hymns, lots of clapping, a rolling chorus of "Praise Jesus" and "Hallelujah." There was a certain cadence to the *hallelujahs*, a flowing out of repetitive sing-song uttered by those with closed eyes and palms pointing to the ceiling, wrists cracked back, arms extended. *Hallelujah*. The hollering and boisterous singing came first, then the sermon, then lots of swaying and more singing that was softer than before and more heartfelt.

At this point, when everyone was sitting down and it seemed time to go home, someone would stand and begin to speak in a language unknown. On occasion that person would be my mother. This was called speaking in tongues. This was anointed. This was when people would get really excited, and the soliloquy would continue on for quite a while. I remember straining

my ears, listening for a pattern to the language. The speaker was always incredibly earnest: this was not intentional trickery. After the speech ended, people would sing independently and pray out loud until someone else stood up to translate what had been said.

Almost every service had an altar call, but it wasn't for the lost so much as it was for the lame. Our preacher frequently healed bad backs, and a crowd would surround the injured person and lay hands. Laying hands just meant touching, but "time to lay hands" seemed to carry a heavier weight than a simple touch. The healing of the bad backs meant that two legs, uneven in length, would be prayed over until the shortened leg grew to meet the length of the other one. This meant the person was healed. I'd never known that so many people had legs that were different lengths, and I'd watch this miracle in sincere amazement.

There was a young man in my town who'd stuck his finger in a live socket as a baby and walked with a limp ever since. He was a photographer, and my mom always told me that he was a smart man and that I wasn't to judge him by his gait. I wanted to take him with us to Faith Full Gospel Church. I wanted to see a miracle that I could be certain was real, but mom always shook her head at this suggestion.

"He doesn't believe like we believe," she'd explained.

“So what? Jesus heals the lame,” I’d answered.

“You have to believe. It’s by your faith that you are healed, not just because you are in need of healing.”

I couldn’t much argue with that. I wanted to be faithful. I wanted to believe. Who was to say what was a miracle, what was the mind, and what was pure hopefulness?

There were never snakes at Faith, and everyone I knew looked down upon that kind of lunacy. Yet how many clicks of the dial did it take to go from straight-laced and conservative Southern Baptist to miracle-performing charismatic? How many more clicks to handling snakes [a way of showing faith in God’s protection against harm]? I didn’t know anyone who’d admitted to going to a snake-handling church, but I knew they were out there. Why else would the snake pits exist? People talked. The deeper you went into the mountains of Eastern Kentucky, the more likely it was you could find such a church. I’d seen enough healings and heard enough tongues spoken to know at a young age that people would do just about anything to get right with the Lord.

Gregory James “Jamie” Coots, a preacher I never met, was born twenty days after my own Kentucky birth back in 1971. He died on February 15, 2014, from a snakebite during a church service at the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name in Middlesboro, Kentucky. He came from a long line of snake-handling preachers. His son, Cody Coots, 21, was bitten three months after his father’s death and survived. The elder Coots starred in a National Geographic reality show, *Snake Salvation*, and believed fervently that he followed God’s will by taking up

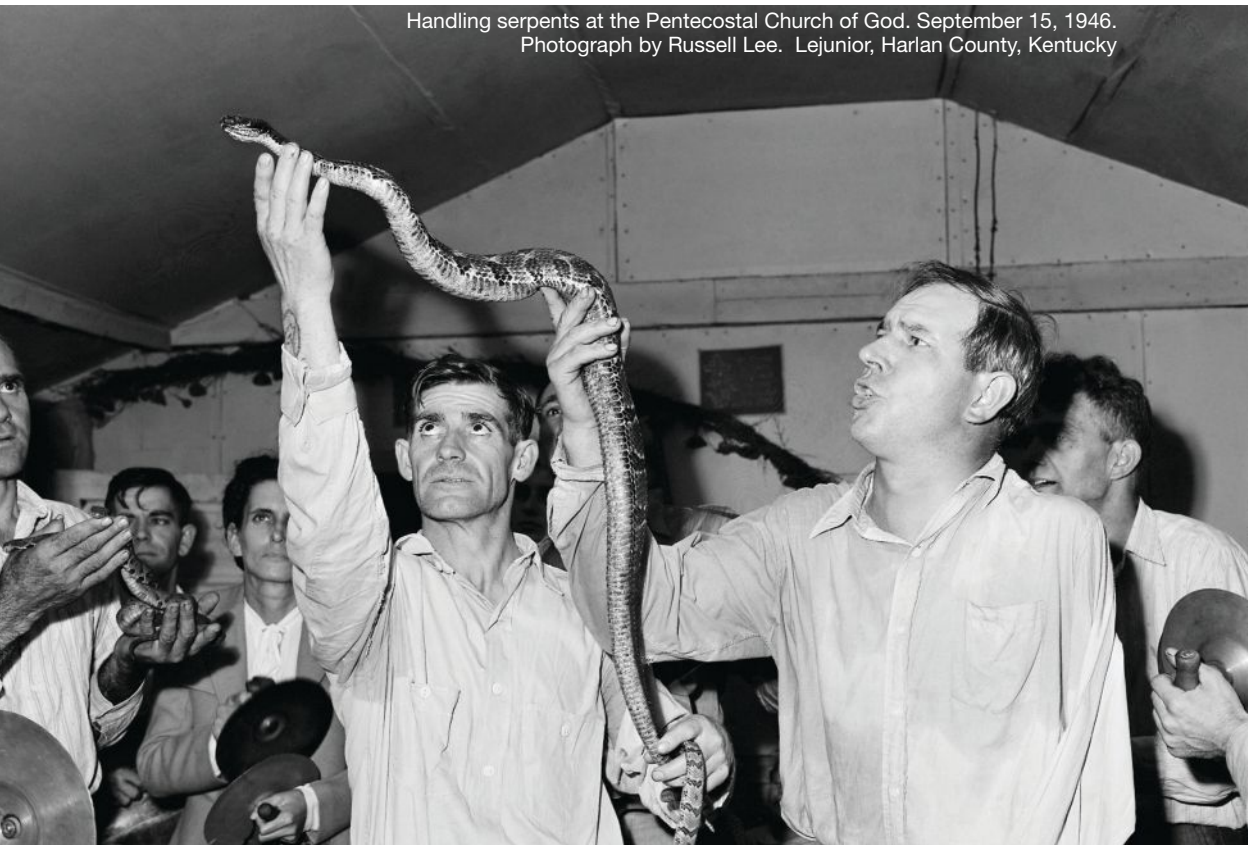
serpents. He lost the tip of a finger following a strike in 1998, and refused medical treatment for several bites, including the one that killed him. Each time, he had prepared a signed letter refusing medical care, stating that it was against his religion.

Middlesboro is 140 miles south of my hometown. It’s near the Cumberland Gap, where my ancestors came to Kentucky from North Carolina via Tennessee almost 250 years ago. I think about Jamie Coots as someone I could have gone to school with, or stood next to playing the tambourine during a Wednesday night prayer meeting. According to an Associated Press article by Travis Loller written after Coots’s death, an average of five people a year die from handling snakes as a part of testing their faith, and seven thousand to eight thousand people handle snakes annually. All of these deaths, presumably, occur in the Appalachian region with known snake-handling churches: Alabama, Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, and South Carolina. Of these states, it’s only legally protected in West Virginia. It’s illegal everywhere else.

Those who take up serpents believe God will protect them from harm if their faith is strong enough. Most who handle snakes aren’t bitten, which they take as a sign of their devotion. Those who are bitten often survive, yet many do not. Handlers, in general, are adamant believers in fate, and subscribe to the notion that God takes each person at their designated time. They continue to choose to incorporate snakes into their worship services regardless of the danger or the law.

What is it, deep in these Appalachian hills, that instills such intense religious

Handling serpents at the Pentecostal Church of God. September 15, 1946.
Photograph by Russell Lee. Lejunior, Harlan County, Kentucky



fervor, turning the dial further away from mainstream religion? Eastern Kentucky is remote, poor, and littered with pockets of hopelessness: burned out single-wide trailers, blasted mountainsides laid waste by mountaintop removal, and the illnesses and drug addictions treated in the regional emergency rooms. Some say the elevated rate of cancer and early mortality in Eastern Kentucky is because of the environmental destruction and pollution brought by the mining industry. Drinking tap water is discouraged, and public drinking fountains are sometimes closed. Sludge and waste from the blasted mountaintops fills the formerly fertile streams and valleys. Shattering mountains to expose hidden seams of coal is quicker and easier than traditional, underground mining.

And yet the people of Kentucky are resilient, and witty, and musical. They can also be despondent, cynical, and undereducated. They are hopeful when they can be. For the most part, they are fiercely loyal to place and heritage, and concerned that the younger generation may be moving away too quickly because of the absence of jobs. Many who stay turn to the faith of their forefathers for comfort, and this Old Time Religion can include the handling of snakes. Sometimes, a traditional Pentecostal church or non-denominational charismatic church, like the one of my youth, is enough. There is no doubt that religious beliefs are held closely here. Family Bibles are handed down for generations and often serve as the best record of ancestry. Church leaders are most likely conservative,

passionate, and above all, literal in their interpretation of the Bible.

The people of eastern Kentucky are deeply tied to the land. Because of the remoteness of the region, they often rely on vegetable gardens and family farms for subsistence. Many men and women hunt for food, not for sport, and a large buck or elk can last the winter with plenty to share. Most of the counties in the region are dry—meaning no legal alcohol can be purchased there, furthering the proliferation of the stereotypical moonshiner with his own still or the bootlegger who runs liquor over the mountains from wet counties. At one point in the 1980s, the mountains were covered in the bright green leaf of illegal marijuana. Not so much anymore—I'd been told once at a nondescript liquor store outside of Hazard.

"Pills is cheaper" the longhaired clerk told me.

"That so," I answered, unsure if he was offering to sell me something under the table to go with my bourbon, or if he was just making conversation. "DEA flies over us now," he said, his hand, held flat, moved between us like an airplane. "They can see the pot. Can't see the oxy from the skies though."

In downtown Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, the First Baptist Church stood at the corner of Howard Avenue and High Street from 1914 to 2000, when the congregation abandoned the old building for a new sanctuary near the bypass. My grandparents were married in this church, as were my own parents, as was I. Although the shell of the red brick structure still stands, when the congregation moved, they stripped the building of its stained glass windows and, I assume, anything of value. I

found photos of the interior of the church at abandonedonline.com: the pew-less space seemed vast and small simultaneously. The pipes from the organ and the peeling golden walls of the sanctuary stood in hazy bright light streaming through the clear panes that replaced the original colorful stained glass. My childhood rushed to meet me. I'd been baptized here in 1977 and scolded for leaving a service early in 1980 because my friend dared me to go check the time and I was bored enough to do so. I'd sung alto in the choir, played hand bells at Christmas, and dressed in scratchy bath towels as a shepherd for a Nativity play. I'd married here in 1995 wearing my mother's wedding dress, feeling very much like a child playing dress up.

This is where I learned to sit without wiggling, to doodle on tithing envelopes, and to stage whisper down a pew: "What's for lunch?" We sang from the Baptist Hymnal: "Just As I Am," "Holy, Holy, Holy," "Amazing Grace." I learned about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego here, about baby Moses turned loose in a basket in the rushes. I learned of Ruth and Naomi, Esther the Queen, and Mary and Martha. Bible Drill leaders taught me how to locate Psalms, or Leviticus, or Romans with a quick flick of the fingers. I also learned—in obvious conflict to my Wednesday night teachings at Faith Full Gospel—that modern-day miracles did not exist, gifts of the spirit were a thing of olden days, and that above all, proper behavior in church was of the highest virtue. There were no tambourines at the First Baptist Church. When things would get spirited, an elderly man from the back of the sanctuary would bellow a low and loud "Amen." Beyond that

occasional outburst, the sermons continued dogmatically on, the congregation sitting primly and completely silent. We didn't even clap.

I knew that although our Wednesday night excursions were not a secret, we weren't exactly to talk about them openly, either. None of my extended family attended a second church and they remained fully loyal to the First Baptist, as far as I knew. Yet we continued, my sisters, my mother and me, to drive out county roads once a week for faith healings and jubilation, tongues and tambourines. It was like an affair: we were committed to the First Baptist for the long haul, but the allure of Wednesday nights kept us coming back.

In both places—the First Baptist and Faith Full Gospel—one thing that was certain was the surety of the church leaders. Neither place gave much credence to doubt. How was I to rectify the two conflicting versions of the same Bible? How was I to discern who was right and who was wrong? Even on this small scale of theological seeking, I peppered my mother with questions. What about Presbyterians? Episcopalians? Goodness, what of the Catholics? The knowledge of the existence of Muslims or Hindus was outside of my worldview, and although I'd heard of Jews, I'd never actually met one, yet agreed with a nod to feel sympathetic for their plight. I spent serious time ruminating on the concept of burning in hell—leaving little time to ponder the fate of a Muslim or Jew. Who would make it to heaven and who would burn for all eternity? And then, what about me? My sins weighed heavy on my heart. What if I'd forgotten a sin and hadn't asked for proper forgiveness? What then? And

what, pray tell, was I to do about the drinking of all that moonshine?

If my younger sister and I were to walk downtown, we'd cut through an alley between the church and their educational building. This is how we learned that the Catholic Church was never locked, and more than once we tested the doors to sneak inside their sanctuary to see what we could find. Church interiors were fascinating. Faith Full Gospel's uncovered windows, creaky hardwood floors, and folding chairs were in stark contrast to the high golden walls and gleaming stained glass of the First Baptist. But the Catholic sanctuary was like nothing we'd seen anywhere else. The crucified Jesus, hanging high on the wall and life-sized, bled with an anguished face, spear in the side, nails through palms. My younger sister and I would creep soundlessly, our mouths agape. All of the crosses we'd ever known had been old and wooden and not draped in the body of a bloody Christ. Beautiful Mary in her blue robe looked serenely passive and accepting of her fate.

Once, a woman—perhaps a nun—found my sister and I in the sanctuary and scolded us loudly. We ran for home, our hearts pounding, our souls once again in some sort of jeopardy even though we weren't sure if sneaking around was a real sin or not. We decided that it had to be, because the woman had scared us. She wouldn't have yelled if our intentions and curiosity had been pure.

The faith of a Catholic was just as foreign to me as a child as the faith of a snake-handler. Up close, I found Catholicism comforting, if a bit austere and frightening. Their bloody icons had stunned my sister and me, the same way

the thought of lifting a snake from a pit and holding it toward heaven elicited shrieks of terror. It was the dial of religion turning once again, yet nothing like snake handling, not at all.

I graduated from high school in 1989 and started college before my eighteenth birthday. The greatest luxury of moving away from home, beyond the lack of a curfew, was my decadent choice to sleep in on Sunday mornings. I didn't seek out a church, or join the Baptist Student Union. I was ready to get away from what I'd come to see as a tedious commitment to prayer meetings, Sunday school, and the multitude of choirs.

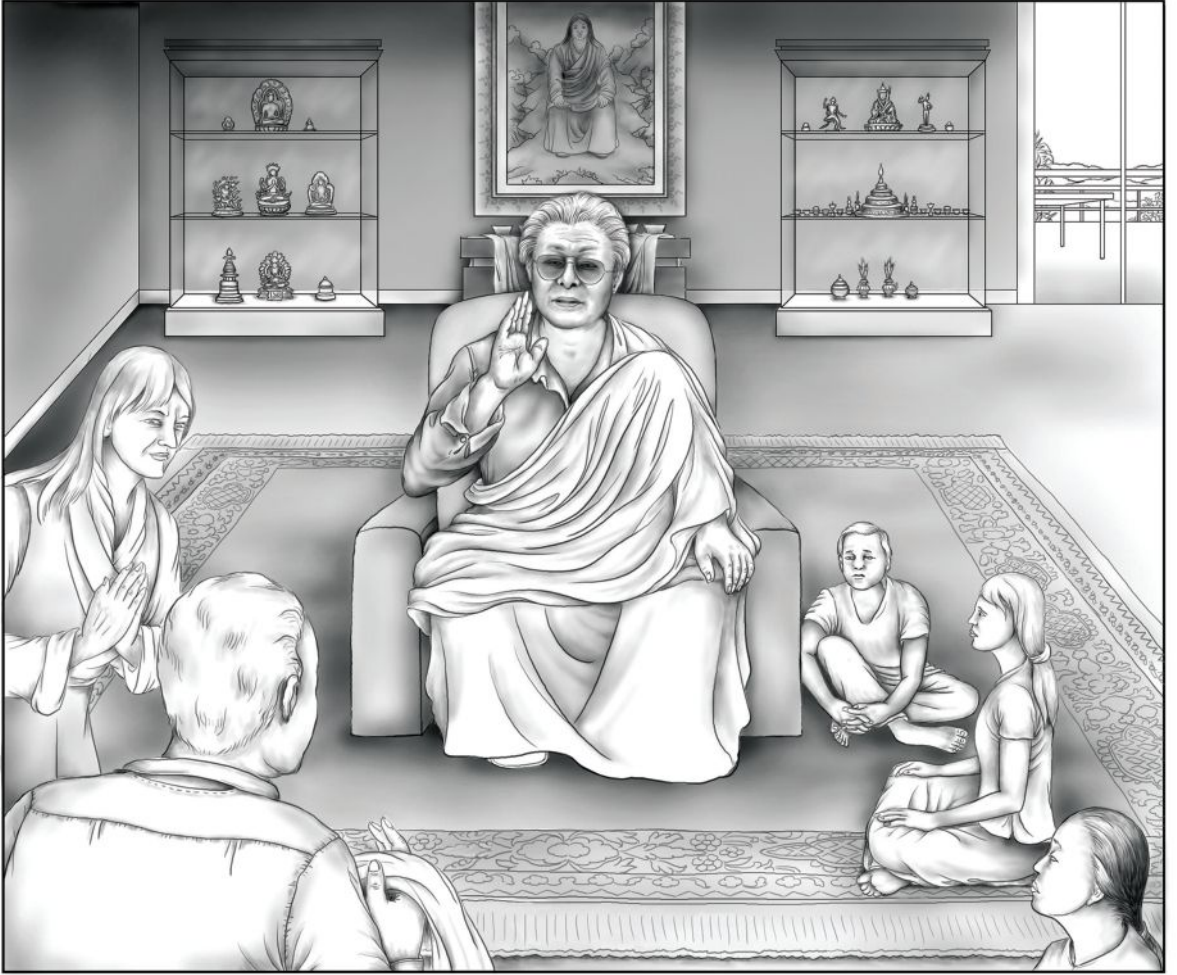
I married. I moved away. I birthed my own daughters, and a few years ago I became a Methodist. Slowly, I began to embrace some of the indoctrination from my childhood as a blessing. I could answer the theological questions from the mouths of my babes with Biblical authority. I could discern a false prophet from miles away. I found that church could be comforting and reliable and a place for the community to come together. And I found a way to turn the dial somewhere closer to where I felt comfortable with my own story and my own path. Not my mother's or the faith of my childhood, but rather a place I could find comfort and peace within my doubt.

A few summers ago I took my daughters to Natural Bridge, Kentucky, in Powell County. We drove the road where my sisters and I would shriek at the snake pits, and my trained eye watched around each curve for a hand-painted wooden board nailed to a tree reading "SNAKE." I never found it. Instead, I told my girls the stories of the pits and of the churches that lift serpents, and they listened, wide-eyed

and curious. It was as though I were speaking in tongues: how foreign this must sound to their ears, and how familiar to my own.

I've often wondered what my mother was looking for on the country road to Faith Full Gospel Church. What did my sister and I seek by trespassing in Catholic spaces? What did I find in the stability and routine of the Southern Baptist Church? Religion is the road, but the spirit is what takes the journey. I found that religion can be both something to cling to and something to flee. It can create holy spaces and misguided teachings and so many questions. I learned that to seek God is perhaps the important part—whether it's through the Bible or the Torah or the Koran. This belief has shaped my spirituality far more than the strictures of my childhood, or perhaps, because of it.

It took time and distance for me to see things clearly, and I'm not sure how clearly I see things, even now. Perhaps it's because each religious influence of my youth seemed to be at odds with the others. I now embrace each person's spiritual journey as their own, and not mine to question. I've found my own path, and it's full of doubt, and questions, and seeking. Perhaps that's why Jamie Coots picked up snakes, held them toward the ceiling of his small church in front of his congregation, and prayed for God to show him pure enough in heart to be worthy of love. He had his own questions and doubts, how could he not? And as he died, the venom clutching his forty-two-year-old heart and claiming his life, who's to say that he wasn't just as worthy of God's grace as any of the rest of us? |



The Truth Of Impermanence

Samuel Bercholz

Art by Pema Namdol Thaye

What happened after the author returned from Hell

Some years ago, Samuel Bercholz, the founder of Shambhala Publications and a long-time Buddhist practitioner, underwent sextuple coronary bypass surgery. In the aftermath of the surgery, he died and, in his words, underwent a horrific “pilgrimage to Hell.” The following excerpt from his memoir, A GUIDED TOUR OF HELL, picks up his story after returning to life from the Buddhist Hell Realm.

OVER THE DAYS, my body adjusted to the pain, and I wanted to get out of the hospital and recuperate at home. I was advised to walk and exercise as much as possible after going home and to drastically change my dietary habits. The doctor warned that my spiritual life wasn't going to be much good if I didn't take care of my physical health as well.

The men and women on the nursing staff who helped guide me toward recovery were a band of angelic beings, putting their patients' needs before their own needs and preferences. I have such deep appreciation for their dedication and their willingness to deal so directly with messy situations, both physical and emotional.

*I told him I was much better.
“So soon?”
“Yes, Rinpoche.”
“Well, Sam. So you think you are
going to live forever? Again?”*

Finally the day arrived for me to leave the hospital. I couldn't wait. It was 120 degrees Fahrenheit outside. Blazing. I was wheeled to my car and brought home. It was going to be hard to do any walking for rehabilitation with the temperature so high.

The recovery period at home was arduous; it was especially difficult to get a normal night's sleep. I would just collapse at various times during the day or night. No position was comfortable to lie or sit or stand in. Everything was torturous. Outside our air-conditioned home, it was like an oven. When you opened the front door, you were almost knocked over by the onslaught of heat. Ivan took me for daily walks an hour before sunrise since that was the coolest part of the day. Strength crept back into my body, and gradually the pain subsided.

The experience of hell seemed far behind me now, although I knew I would never see this world in the same way again. In spite of that, I was shocked that my bad habits of distraction, time wasting, and pettiness all reasserted themselves with a vengeance. Even though I had witnessed so vividly the reality of the four noble truths—the existence of suffering, the cause of suffering, the possibility of the cessation of suffering, and the ways to overcome suffering—it

was just too easy to return to my habitual ways. There was nothing to do but just keep practicing with faith and diligence, to burn out the confusions that obstruct awakening.

After a month, I was well enough to go to Thinley Norbu Rinpoche's house to join with him and a small group of his students in an evening meditation session. Rinpoche welcomed me with a big smile and warm greetings. I was so very happy to be together with everyone again.

In coming to this part of my story, I can't help recalling the unusual circumstances in which I happened to enter the orbit of Thinley Norbu. Several years after the passing of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, one of my work colleagues, Brian, asked me if I'd like to meet his teacher, Dodrupchen Rinpoche, who was arriving from Asia at Boston's Logan Airport. I accepted the invitation, and we went to the airport. The plane was late. Brian became quite nervous at some point and informed me that Thinley Norbu Rinpoche had just entered the terminal. Would I like to be introduced to him? I said yes. I had read Thinley Norbu Rinpoche's book *THE SMALL GOLDEN KEY* and had been impressed by its depth.

Rinpoche, accompanied by two attendants, immediately approached

Brian and greeted him. Brian introduced me, but Rinpoche paid no attention. After some more conversation, Brian again tried to introduce us. Rinpoche turned to me and started shouting at the top of his lungs about how stupid and arrogant I was, thinking I knew anything about either Dharma or “crazy wisdom.” To say the least, I was stunned.

Suddenly I remembered instructions that Trungpa Rinpoche had given me many years before, on what to do if I were ever accosted by a high lama. At the time, I thought this a very strange prospect; why would I ever be accosted by a lama? Nonetheless, I listened carefully to Trungpa Rinpoche’s very specific instructions about exactly what to say.

I now remembered this advice and followed the instructions to a T. At once Thinley Norbu Rinpoche began laughing very hard. He then said, “Okay, okay.”

Dodrupchen Rinpoche finally arrived and was greeted by everyone there. One of the ladies attending Thinley Norbu Rinpoche then asked me if I’d like to meet with Rinpoche at the terminal at the opposite end of the airport.

I made my way to the far terminal and saw Rinpoche sitting there. His demeanor had changed, and he beckoned me to sit down next to him. He told me how much he liked the atmosphere of airports; they were like *bardos*, transitional places where people passed from one place to another. We went on to converse about Buddhism and politics. That time together made a great impression upon me.

Weeks later I went to Europe to do a solitary meditation retreat. At the end of the retreat, I received a letter from a close friend, to whom I had described the airport encounter. He urged me to follow up on that encounter, telling me that Rinpoche was making me an offer.

After returning to America, I went to see Thinley Norbu Rinpoche and requested to become his student. After considering it for several hours, he agreed. First I visited him on many occasions and received teachings from him in person and often on the telephone. His insight and kindness were unimaginable. He filled in all the areas that Trungpa Rinpoche had suggested I should look into. For at least fifteen of the twenty-one years that I was Thinley Norbu’s student, I lived in his community and practiced with him nearly every evening. I was so fortunate to have the opportunity to study under such wondrous teachers.

Now our reunion after my near-death encounter was full of poignant meaning.

Just as we were about to begin the meditation session, Rinpoche casually asked me how I was feeling. I told him I was much better.

“So soon?”

“Yes, Rinpoche.”

“Well, Sam. So you think you are going to live forever? Again?”

Rinpoche had to remind me again of the truth of impermanence, to make sure. It was a bolt of wisdom-lightning directed into my reborn heart with exquisite precision. |

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Viktor Frankl and the Search for Meaning:

A Conversation with

Alexander Vesely and Mary Cimiluca



“When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

—Viktor E. Frankl, *MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING*

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

—Viktor E. Frankl, *MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING*

Few books of the last century have had a greater impact on our quest for meaning than Viktor Frankl’s MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING. This all-time bestseller was written by a Jewish man who had just lost everything in the Holocaust. When Frankl, emaciated from concentration camps, returned to his beloved Vienna, no one was there to meet him. His mother had been gassed at Auschwitz. His brother had been killed in another camp. His wife, Tilly, had starved to death in the women’s camp at Bergen-Bergen. Now, he wondered, what was the point of his life?

“I decided not to commit suicide—at least not before I had reconstructed my first book, THE DOCTOR AND THE SOUL....” After Frankl finished that book, friends who read it asked him to write another, this time about his experience in the concentration camps. He poured out MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING in just nine days, weeping in an empty room with windows bombed out from the war. Seventy years later, the book remains a classic textbook for college students and a guidepost for people all faiths. A nun told me that Mother Teresa encouraged her novitiates to read MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING as part of their spiritual formation. The book was listed as one of the ten most influential books in America by the Library of Congress.

As a professor, I have assigned MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING to college students for over twenty years. Recently I invited Frankl’s grandson Alexander Vesely to screen his film VIKTOR & I at the university. I interviewed him and Mary Cimiluca, Frankl family advisor and CEO of Noetic Films, which produced the movie, for a forthcoming book.

—Fran Grace

Viktor Frankl, 1965



Fran Grace: *Did your grandfather see your potential as a filmmaker?*

Alexander Vesely: He actually gave me my first video camera! It's a funny story about a side of him that we all knew. He was a very generous man. One time he was in a radio store. There was a man in the store asking to see various models of radios and the prices. Hearing the prices, the man said, "Oh forget it, I can't afford it." So my grandfather, standing next to him, said, "Pick the one you like, I'm going to pay for it." He bought the man a radio, but it wasn't just to be "nice." It was for the meaning of it. He said, "I have the money, what's the most meaningful place for my money to be? Do I need the extra fifty bucks or would it be more

meaningful if this man had those fifty bucks?"

FG: *Frankl shared his money easily?*

AV: To such a point that my parents told my sister and me not to utter anything that could be bought in his presence! Not to say, "I'd like this or that." Because he would go buy it. There was only one time that I consciously broke that rule. I was fourteen, and video cameras were starting to come down in price. I said, "It would be really great to have one of these video cameras." A few days later, as I knew it would, the phone rang and my grandfather said, "Tell Alex to come over." So I went over and he said, "I heard that you need a video camera and I'm going to make

Frankl said, “Never compare suffering. Everyone has their own Auschwitz.”

that happen.” There was a discussion with my parents, of course. They knew what I was doing. But by that time it was too late! I shot a lot of footage of my grandfather with that camera, some of which you see in *VIKTOR & I*.

FG: *Mary, what is your story?*

Mary Cimiluca: I read *MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING* in college in the 1960s and then I met Viktor Frankl in 1987. But it wasn’t until 2008 that I really “got” Frankl—my life fell out from under me. One after the other, every member of my family died. When I thought it couldn’t get any worse, my best friend was brutally murdered and I had to go identify the body. I lost my mind and landed in a psych ward in D.C. I was mandated to stay for twenty-one days and be in the care of a psychiatrist. He said, “I want you to read this book, *MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING*.” I said, “Get out of here with that book, I know all about that book, it’s not going to save me now!” But he told me, “Your life parallels his and someday you’ll realize it.” That was true.

He let me out when I wrote up my “business plan” for a new life. At that point, I was safe from suicide. At fifty-eight, I wasn’t fond of change. But, six weeks later, I had sold my house, moved to a sunny place across the country, knowing no one, sight unseen, to retire at the beach. My feeling of being settled lasted three months. I started to deteriorate, sitting at home crying. It’s what Frankl calls an “existential

vacuum.” I decided to go back to work in a business I owned that did recording for conferences all over world. That’s how I met Alex, in 2008.

The work of Frankl for me is personal. His work saved my life.

FG: *How did Frankl help you recover from your breakdown?*

MC: We all have to face suffering, and we have to realize that ours may be different from another’s. Frankl said, “Never compare suffering. Everyone has their own Auschwitz.” He always put himself on the same level as those he encountered.

Frankl gave us three ways to uncover meaning. “Creative” way—write a book, make a movie, create a business, etc. “Experiential” way—encounter another person, love them in their singularity and uniqueness, or go somewhere that changes your life. “Attitudinal” way—this is the path for those who face unavoidable suffering such as an incurable illness or the death camps. You can’t escape the condition, but you can choose your attitude toward it and fill it with meaning: an inner triumph. All three of these ways helped me to uncover the meaning in my life.

FG: *What is logotherapy [the school of existential therapy developed by Frankl]?*

AV: Logos comes from the Greek word “meaning”; therapy is “healing”: “Healing through meaning.” Frankl created logotherapy as a young psychiatrist working with suicidal patients, before he was deported to the

My grandfather emphasized that it's not about "having what you need to live" but asking yourself, "What am I living for?"

concentration camps. We are meaning-oriented beings, and we long for meaning. If we struggle, we will become better if we find something meaningful that fills what he called the "existential vacuum."

Although he struggled to have faith in humankind after the war, Frankl ended up, in logotherapy, affirming a theory of humanity that seeks to elicit the potential for good and for meaning. He would always assume the best in others, even those who assumed the worst about him. This is a basis in his theory of logotherapy: to look for the best in people. He would say, "If you take a man as he is, you make him worse. If you take a man as he *can* be, you help him become who he can be, the best version of who he is." And of course he meant "women" too—he used the language of the time.

He was not interested in the worst version of anyone and how we can analyze that. My grandfather focused in on the "best version" of you and acted as if you were already there. This had an uplifting effect on people. Still, he wasn't stupid, he wasn't one-sided. I want to be clear that he didn't deny the horrors of humanity. How could he? He had come out of the worst savagery. He would say: "After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips."

There's a Hitler and a Mother Teresa in all of us, he would say. And it's a personal decision which of the two we're going to let ourselves become.

FG: *What is Frankl's message to young people, when depression, suicide, and drug overdoses are at an all-time high?*

AV: He saw it as a prerogative of youth to question the meanings and values handed down from previous generations. As a youth, my grandfather questioned the "orthodoxies" of his day. His life was challenging. But he never gave up on life. Or on himself. He said that it was our responsibility to find the meaning in what we face. "We all have a will to meaning in us." He said that the "will to pleasure" (Freud) and the "will to power" (Adler) do not define the human being. They do not bring happiness or fulfillment. If you try to pursue happiness for its own sake, it will elude you. Happiness "ensues" when you fulfill something that is meaningful to you. It is through that seemingly paradoxical process of "self-transcendence"—forgetting oneself—that real "self-actualization" becomes possible.

The will to meaning is there in everyone, but sometimes it gets warped. Other things cover it over, and you have to uncover it. Always—even in old age. My grandfather really started going at age sixty! He started taking flying lessons when he was sixty-six. He was always open to new ways of seeing the

world and experiencing himself. The opportunities for meaning are different at every stage of your life.

Abraham Maslow, in his “hierarchy of needs,” said that once basic needs (food, shelter) are met, then the intangibles such as love, meaning, and self-actualization can be fulfilled. But my grandfather disagreed. He told Maslow how people did not have their “basic” needs met in the concentration camps, but it was the “higher” needs (i.e., meanings, love, and values) that proved to be much more relevant to their chance of survival. Maslow revised his ideas and said, “Frankl is right.” My grandfather emphasized that it’s not about “having what you need to live” but asking yourself, “What am I living *for*?” The most affluent societies have all their basic needs met, but they lack something to live *for*, and neurotic disorders tend to increase.

FG: *Your grandfather was very popular at American universities. Packed auditoriums. What did he say that struck such a chord?*

AV: Frankl said there are three problems facing youth. One is aggression, killing and harming each other. Look at all of the violence. Then there is depression, to the point of suicide, wanting to die. And the third is addiction, trying to escape from life through pleasure, diversion—drugs, drinking, any kind of excessive behavior.

FG: *What did he say was the way out of these problems?*

AV: Meaning orientation. If you have meaningful tasks to fulfill, you will not hurt yourself. If you see that your life has meaning, then you respect that life, you feel a responsibility to preserve it.

First, he said, if you don’t see a meaning, the meaning of the hour is to go find one, seek, be on a quest. Make it a priority. Then, if you still don’t see it over a long period of time, and perhaps you are even contemplating suicide, then the meaning of the hour becomes to at least stay alive despite the apparently meaningless situation just so that you will still be around when meaning again becomes visible. There’s never a situation where there is no meaning, if you give it time and look close enough. Let’s say you are going through severe depression and you can’t go out and search for a meaning. If you commit to staying alive, you will then be here when your meaning is made clear. People who attempt suicide and survive say they eventually did find a meaning and are glad they are still alive to live it out.

FG: *People criticize Frankl for saying there is meaning to be found in the concentration camp. Is that what he said?*

AV: No. That’s a misunderstanding. He wrote very concisely. He wanted to make his books as simple as possible, so that anybody could read them. But then people take an already boiled-down statement, remove a key phrase and say something like, “Your grandfather said Auschwitz had a meaning too!” That is a distortion of what he said. He said, “If you are confronted with unavoidable suffering, what can you learn from the situation? What meaning can we now squeeze out of this seemingly meaningless situation?” He did not say the situation itself was meaningful. But maybe a meaning can be derived by understanding what led to the Holocaust, so we have a chance to prevent it from ever happening again. ■



Poster for Mantra-Rock Dance event, January 29, 1967, San Francisco

Meet a man impossible to classify

Laurie

Richard Whittaker

ONE OF MY FIRST EXPERIENCES IN SAN FRANCISCO was of being flagged down by a stranger as I drove toward the intersection of Stanyan and Frederick Streets at the edge of Golden Gate Park. My friend Malcolm Hall and I, both college students, had driven up the coast highway from Los Angeles in my 1953 Plymouth. The year was 1965. We were headed toward the Haight-Ashbury.

Maybe thirty yards short of the intersection, I saw him standing on the curb, a disheveled young man, not quite in the hippie mold. He was looking directly at me it seemed, and gesturing emphatically, an incongruous grin on his face. As the car moved closer, my expression must have revealed my uncertainty because he nodded his head. Yes. It was me he was gesturing to. I turned to Malcolm with a look, “should we?” Malcolm was non-committal. I pulled over.

The young man walked up to us still smiling and, without a word, pointed again. I stared in puzzlement. At this he nodded his head and, to clarify matters, repeated the pointing.

“What do you mean?” I managed to ask.

“Donuts!” He said. “Do you guys like donuts?”

I saw it then, a donut shop right ahead of us at the intersection.

Whatever threat this smiling stranger—maybe five foot eight—might represent stemmed more from his assault on my sense of social convention than anything else. Besides, there were two of us.

The hippie revolution was in full flower and things were going on that crossed a lot of boundaries. Wasn’t this, in some basic way, part of the idea? I parked the car and Malcolm and I walked over to the donut shop with our new friend. Taking a cue from him, it would seem nothing could have been more exciting than getting some glazed donuts and maybe a coffee together, the three of us! This was something I could never have dreamt up on my own, an adventure both too banal and too transgressive at the same time.

Walking in, we found a booth and sat down, Malcolm and I facing the stranger across the table.

“What’s your name?”

“Laurie.”

That’s a girl’s name, I couldn’t help thinking. “How do you spell that?”

Laurie just stared at me with his big smile, and nodded.

He had a scraggly beard and his teeth were uneven.

“How do you spell that?” I asked again.

“L-a-u-r-i-e.” The smile remained along with his direct gaze on us both. He didn’t seem uncomfortable, at least.

“Do you live around here?”

An awkward conversation hitched along for a few minutes and then he said, “Let’s get some donuts. Don’t you guys want some?”

“Sure.” I said, getting up. “Can we get you some?”

“Thanks! Maybe some coffee, too,” he said.

I don’t think I’d ever met a street person before. In 1965 I’m not sure that phrase had even come into usage. There were tramps and bums and, by then, beats, beatniks and of course, most immediately, hippies. But in Laurie’s case, no categories quite fit. This was a situation I’d have to face without them.

Struggling to relate as we ate our donuts, we swapped basic information. We told him we were visiting and would be heading back to LA in a few days. Were we going to pass through Monterey? he wondered. Could we drop him off there? We told Laurie we’d check in with him on our way out of town and he gave us an address. The conversation hitched along. When it faltered, Laurie just

looked at us with a silent grin, not making small talk to smooth things out. When we finished our donuts, I was happy to escape.

When the morning came to head back to LA we found the address, a boarded-up house. Approaching cautiously, I pried back a piece of plywood. “Hey Laurie!” I shouted into the shadows. After a couple of tries an answer came back from the shadows and, sure enough, Laurie appeared.

“*You* guys!” He was not expecting us. We’d awakened him. “Come in,” he said. Enough light was coming in here and there to permit our seeing a dilapidated couch, old coffee table and a couple of chairs.

“Wow,” he said, just looking at us. “You guys actually came back.” What routines of betrayal put our simple act in such a light? I couldn’t help wondering.

“Do you guys want to listen to some of my songs?”

“What about Monterey?” I asked. No, he couldn’t go down there today. But did we want to hear some of his music?

Where I come from, you don’t refuse certain things and this seemed like one of those moments. Laurie disappeared and returned with an old acoustic guitar. His singing wasn’t so good. That was my first reaction, but I listened and then something else came in; it’s what I remember most.

He finished his song and said, “I’ve got a tape of more of my songs.” Reaching for a beat up tape player, he said, “Hey, wait here. I’ll be right back,” and disappeared into the darkness of the abandoned house.

Malcolm and I sat listening to the tape player and its tiny speaker. Yes,

the same quality I'd heard before was coming through it, too. If I had to pick one word for it, it would be something like *heartbreaking*.

My encounter with Laurie, as brief as it was, left unforgettable impressions. Moreover, by a twist of fate, it was not the last I'd see of him. In fact, it was just the beginning.

THREE YEARS LATER

By 1968 I'd lived in San Francisco for two years and had recently moved in with a woman I'd fallen in love with. In North Beach, she'd cut quite a figure. Besides being tall and beautiful, she'd become a bit of a celebrity among the locals. One of the characters Karen had become friends with was named Laurie Seagel.

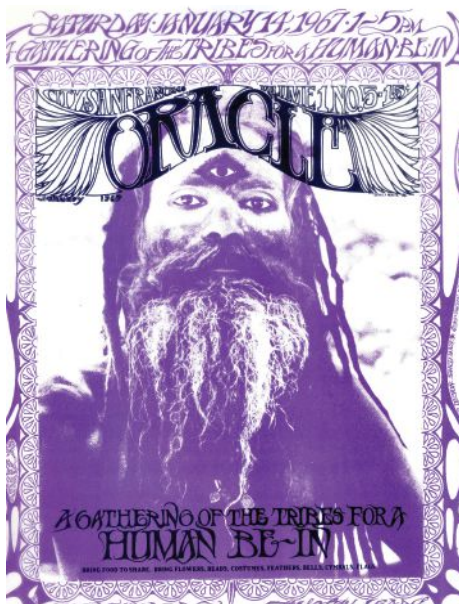
"You know Laurie?" I asked in astonishment. "Laurie Seagel?"

Karen and I lived at the top of Vallejo Street on Telegraph Hill and I began to run into Laurie regularly. Sometimes we had Laurie over for dinner along with street poet Johnny Woodrose, who I'd met while running a poetry program in the basement of a church near Haight St. Before my move to North Beach I'd occasionally seen Laurie at free concerts in Golden Gate Park where The Jefferson Airplane, Buffalo Springfield and Big Brother and the

Holding Company with Janis Joplin often performed for free. Laurie sometimes jumped up on stage and tried to grab a mike to join in on harmonica. His harmonica playing wasn't any better than his guitar playing, but he seemed unfazed by such considerations. He'd always get ushered off the stage, but I couldn't help noticing that the band members all seemed to know Laurie and never seemed much upset with his antics.

A longer account of my friendship with Laurie is for another time. But his freedom from worry about what others might think is one of his qualities I remember most clearly. It was something I witnessed time and again in many different ways. Perhaps this quality struck me so much because of my own lack in that regard. There were many other things I learned about him that surprised me. He'd been a gifted philosophy student at Stanford University and related amazing stories about his time spent with Gregory Bateson's family, Richard Alpert and others.

From time to time, Laurie would say something with a strong inflection of Zen. I remember asking him about it. Yes, he used to love being around Suzuki Roshi, the head of the San Francisco Zen Center. He told me about having a meal there one day. The monks were having a silent lunch and he managed to join the group, but Laurie



Cover of the *San Francisco Oracle*, Volume 1 No.5. From Facsimile Edition

wasn't interested in keeping the silence. He kept attempting conversation with the monks sitting at table with him. Finally one of the monks complained. "If he's going to talk, why can't the rest of us?" Suzuki replied, "For Laurie, it's allowed."

Laurie was a man impossible to classify.

Given his talents, whatever obstacles stood in the way of conventional success must have been powerful. But the most obvious problem he faced was addiction. He'd been shooting up amphetamines at least since I'd first met him in 1965. He'd suffered from hepatitis at least once if not two or three times. Listening to his stories, I learned that he'd been arrested several times, too. He'd been severely beaten at least once while in jail by another inmate and had also been beaten more than once by police. He went through difficult times, but was always far more dangerous to himself than to anyone else. By 1968 the years of physical abuse were showing up in mental as well as physical symptoms. Laurie's future appeared grim indeed.

Then one day, I got a call from Laurie. He'd been in Napa State Hospital detoxing and now was out. Somehow he'd managed to get an airline ticket to Israel. "It's my last chance," he told me. Could he borrow a sleeping bag to take with him?

I wondered if it was a flight of fancy, but a few days later, Laurie showed up at the door. I handed over the sleeping bag, we embraced, and I wished him the best of luck.

Laurie did go to Israel. He joined a Kibbutz. A year later, I got a letter from him. He had married a beautiful Israeli,

Talilah. He'd become a social worker. Why didn't I come over and visit? As the next few years passed, I got more messages. First there was one child, Hadar, then Sagi then a third. I have forgotten the name.

Then a few years later, I got a call from Talila. Laurie had died from liver failure. She told me a story about Laurie's social work in Israel. She told me how hard it was, the low pay. He worked with addicts and others, and was much loved, she said. People thought he had mysterious powers. She told me of a woman who wanted to have children. She had tried everything. No luck. But one day Laurie met with her and held her hand. "You are going to have children," he told her. "Don't worry." Shortly thereafter, Talilah told me, the woman conceived. She did have a child.

I don't remember exactly when Laurie gave me a copy of a manuscript he'd written, *ALL MEN SHALL BE GODS*, but I still have it. For years, I've wanted to publish a particular section from it, a remarkable account of an experiment in living he carried out in San Francisco in the early 1960s before he fell under the sway of amphetamines. I feel compelled to underline how striking I find this singular inquiry to have been. It's an ontological adventure that could easily have remained untold and I'm grateful, finally, to be able to share it with others. Here is that excerpt:

Laurie Seagel writes:

I decided to try to find out what were man's basic needs. I would live without most things I was accustomed to and see what it would be like. I decided to give up words; I would only say "yes," "yes" to every question, nothing more, a nod of the head would usually suffice. I



would give up things; sandals, a thin shirt and a thin pair of pants would be enough. I knew I could adjust to temperatures in San Francisco through bodily relaxation. The fewer clothes the better; I would worry about changing when the need arose. Nothing in my pockets, nothing, no money, no identification, nothing. And no place. I would break the habit of thinking “where” and “where to?” All places would be equal. I would try to learn to be comfortable anywhere.

I hid a sleeping bag in the bushes near Coit Tower, the highest point on Telegraph Hill, though I ended up sleeping in it only once. The rest of my belongings I hauled over to the family home in Oakland.

Usually, I wore a hat pulled down low. I sat, relaxed my body, and watched, or listened—looked and listened. I sat in Cassandra’s, in the Coffee Gallery, the Bagel Shop, The Place—these were the main gathering spots for people I knew. There was also

the Cellar Jazz Club, evenings. Still later some nights after the Cellar closed, we sojourned across town to the Black Fillmore district where jazz was played until early morning at Jimbo’s Bop City. Or I’d go off by myself, as most of the others went home.

When Cassandra’s closed, I’d cross the street where a small cafe was good for a short stop. The small hours of the morning, three to five, I’d spend in a variety of regular ways. Lying among the empty bins in the Italian bakery on Grant just above Green, I watched the bakers working, kneading, arranging, shoving the long rows of loaves into the great oven—rhythm, movement, fire and quiet Italian talk. I enjoyed the warmth and the smell, enjoyed watching them work, like a dance it was—and they always welcomed me. I was a spectator whose enjoyment in watching them heightened their own enjoyment in the work. Invariably one of them would thrust a fresh loaf of bread upon me when I rose to leave.

Another activity for three to five in the morning was walking through the bustling, bright and raucous produce market located then at easy walking distance from North Beach. My eyes delighted in the colors of the fruits and vegetables, and I felt energy from the surging of the men and their machines, the helter-skelter of it all. Here too, people got used to seeing me among them. I was always silent and happy, smiling from the delight my eyes were beholding. I was joyous watching the beauty of existence. Here in the produce market people called me “wolf-man,” I suppose because my hair was long and shaggy, but they always acted toward me with friendliness and offered me fruit, which I ate.

When I was especially tired, during these pre-dawn hours and at other times also, I went into rhythmical walking, sometimes for long distances around San Francisco, long rhythmical strides, arms swinging. The action sort of turned me on, got me high, rested me.

Every day, before the sun rose, I climbed to the top of Telegraph Hill somewhere alongside of Coit Tower, to sit and meditate. From my spot, all the sounds of the bay down below me in an arc left, right and center rose up directly, undisturbed by any edifice. I sat, relaxed deeply, deeply, and listened, watched. The sounds of the ships, of the city, of the birds were pleasant to me. I enjoyed them every day, day after day, for hours at a time. When I began hearing the coarser hum of human voices—tourists appeared about nine in the morning to look out on the bay—I lay down where I was and slept for a few hours. I liked sleeping in the sun.

When I awoke, I usually went to Washington Square Park, or down

through Fisherman’s Wharf to Aquatic Park. On the grass of Washington Square, or the sand of Aquatic Park, I’d catch some more sleep in the sun, sometimes swim in the bay at Aquatic Park, eat raw fish at the wharf, or I would sit and watch, listen, or be together with friends—“beatniks” we were beginning to be called after Chronicle columnist Herb Caen put together Kerouac’s “beat” with the “nik” from the Russian “Sputnik.”

Looking and listening were for me ways of quieting my mind, teaching it to not think, breaking habits of thought like: what to do? where to go? But after awhile, looking and listening became something much more: I came to see and to hear the world, existence, more and more acutely. The more I watched and listened, the more I saw and heard, more keenly, more distinctly.

Every day I gained more and more pleasure from this listening and looking, always seeing and hearing more clearly. As time went on, I appreciated how glorious and beautiful existence is, living. I saw how busy, preoccupied were most people with doing, making. Existence was already so much to enjoy, so grand and lovely, so exquisite. Just to see, to hear the sights and sounds that were there made me happy and delighted. I was truly happy and at peace. Everywhere. All the time.

Throughout those eight months, or a year—I’m not sure exactly how many months went by—I had not the slightest inkling of trouble of any kind. The two policemen on the beat, when they passed me they said, “Hi Laurie,” and that was that. I did what I wanted, when I wanted to, sometimes with others, but most often alone. I roamed freely, drank lots of water, ate enough somehow and

was always serene in enjoyment of the beauty of all I saw unfolding before me, day into night, night again into day: the warmth of the sun, the cool breezes, the fog, the wind, the sea, sky and stars, trees, flowers, children playing, old people, young mothers with their children, the Chinese, the Italians, the French, the Basque.

My attention became so keen I saw in crowded coffee shops and meeting places, how people's bodies reacted to each other's without their consciously knowing it.

When I sat at a live jazz session, my hearing was so sharp, it was like what poets call "a sensitive ear in the audience." I would hear each particular instrument, separately. The musicians told me that when I listened, they began to hear themselves more distinctly, then each heard the other, and the music grew in intensity and those jam sessions were really something else... at the Cellar, and on weekends, at the Coffee Gallery.

It was all a part of that community spirit which existed, the spirit that both allowed me to be on "this trip" and to live freely in the midst of it. The life of North Beach nourished me, fed my spirit and my body. It was fun to be with this happy throng, to share with them the sounds of talk, laughter, music, nature, the clanging of the cable car bell, the sound of the seagulls, Sonny's saxophone, Max's bass fiddle, Bill Wiesjon's piano, Chuck Taylor's drums.

What are the basic needs of man? What did I learn during this time? I lived very contentedly on almost nothing. I required little sleep and little food. I drank water copiously, had abundant sunshine, walked and ran tremendous amounts, meditated, rested

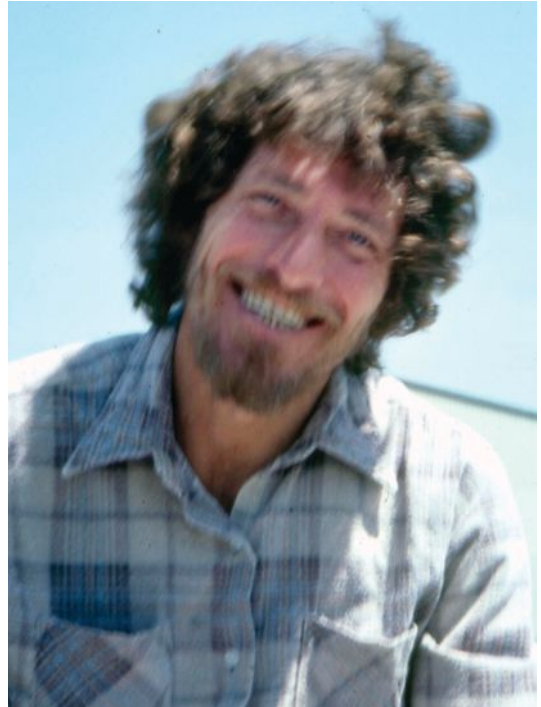
much, did not feel the need for sex, though I enjoyed frequent human companionship, or at least proximity.

I came to regard my needs as so scant that you could say that what you need is what you want. Air, water, rest, exercise, a little food, this is all I seemed to need.

I did have an acute sense of something like regret or sorrow that other people were not enjoying existence as much as I was then. If only they could sit more quietly and look, listen, feel. I felt that people could live better that way and that society would be better, life would be better that way. But I didn't talk. I didn't think I could start talking and somehow teach people to be that way, change the world.

When I finally did decide to end this period, I just hoped that somehow, some way, I could express what I had experienced and learned and somehow bring some of it back into existence, at least into my own existence, and perhaps for others as well... I.

Laurie Seagal. Photograph by Richard Whittaker





Aboriginal wisdom and advanced physics meet in
the Karoo of South Africa

The Dawn's Heart Star and the Speed of Light

Neil Rusch



IN PHYSICS THERE IS ONE DEFINING CONSTANT—299,792,458 meters per second. It is the speed of light.

Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), observing the moons of Jupiter, accidentally—because he was attempting to find a measure of time that would solve the problem of longitude—set in motion a line of investigation that was resolved by the Danish astronomer Ole Roemer (1644–1710), who established the speed of light sixty-six years later using, as the basis of his calculations, the moons of Jupiter (rightly called Jovian, or Galilean, satellites). What began as an inquiry attempting to solve a problem of navigation (thrown out because deemed impractical for use at sea) has had profound consequences for cosmology.

Most of the universe is not in the stars and galaxies. It's in what we can't see.

Light is the most rapid means through which one part of the universe can relay an impression, through space, to another. Light thus considered moves us into deep time, a measure of which is the speed of light. There is, however, another way of apprehending and measuring time, and this derives from the inconstancy of light. Light changes and shifts in cycles yielding days and nights; spring, summer, autumn, winter—the seasons; years. The diurnal nature of light generates and animates organic life on earth. By this account, light motivates change and process, while on the other hand, light speed, as a constant, is unchanging and eternal, although paradoxically in motion. Light's dual nature—constant but shifting—impinges on us, and we live the contradiction of being in one place at two times; both times in the same place: one world, two modes of apprehension, timely and timeless.

BY THE LIGHT OF TWO COSMOLOGIES

The light that is received from the Galilean satellites informs two cosmologies; the one, a Western motivated scientific story, and the other an inspired narrative specific to the Ixam-speaking San people who inhabited

San men, late eighteenth century. Samuel Daniell. Library of Parliament



the central Karoo, a place known to them as Ixam-ka !au (dust of the Ixam). What is

remarkable is that it requires exceptional eyesight to see the Dawn's Heart Child (as they call Jupiter's satellites) with naked-eye observation.¹ Very few people can achieve this; however, it was possible for the Ixam, assisted by semi-desert atmospherics, such that the Dawn's Heart Star story was pervasive and persuasive in Ixam cosmology. Here is the Ixam story-teller ||kabbo reporting the Dawn's Heart Star speaking to his heart, the Dawn's Heart Child. The narrative in its entirety fills three-hundred notebook pages and took five months to dictate and record. The extract provides a vivid description of the Galilean satellites orbiting Jupiter, in addition to being a story about the Dawn's Heart Star.

You are the Dawn's Heart Child, a star. I am your father, a star. And so I bury you as a star.
You are my heart. I made a child with my heart and so swallow you.
I walk with you. When you grow I spit you out from my mouth.
You go from me and I walk behind.

MARGINAL BUT MEANINGFUL TERRITORY

Karoo is a KhoeSan word that describes a region in southern Africa. It is both biome—"the place of great dryness"—and geological system. Additionally, it is a landscape saturated with meaning.² The cosmology and knowledge of the Ixam San people is recognized as especially valuable and is

included in UNESCO's Memory of the World-Register for Documentary Heritage.³

The Karoo does not only have exceptional atmospherics and a unique mythology of global significance, it has exceptional acoustics as well. Elsewhere, there is another location with similar characteristics; the desert region near the Murchison Range in Western Australia, an area inhabited by Aboriginal people for millennia. A huge telescope is presently under construction in both places because of the aforesaid reasons. Known as the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) radio astronomy project, this telescope, when completed, will be the world's biggest telescope anywhere, and will be capable of "seeing" further back in time than any other telescope. The SKA is a global project supported by twenty-two countries and involving 122 international institutions. It is the largest terrestrial science experiment ever undertaken (space programs excluded).

The Astronomy Reserve proclaimed by South African law sits astride the homeland of the !xam San people. The KAT-7 and MeerKAT radio telescopes are situated some eighty km northwest of the small Karoo town of Carnarvon.

WHAT ARE WE LISTENING FOR?

Radio astronomy took off in the 1940s. The curved lens of an optical telescope captures and magnifies frequencies of visible light. The curved dish antennae of a radio telescope, in contrast, receive and amplify discrete wavelengths—"signals of invisible radiation"—that are beyond the visual and auditory range of human sight and hearing. Russ Taylor was an early convert. Since its inception, in the early 1990s, he has been with the SKA project and is one of the chief architects. He explains radio astronomy like this: "We realized in spite of all the discoveries and advances in astronomy that we actually still knew very little about the universe. The light that we could see with our optical telescopes was in fact a small fraction of what the universe is made of. The real mysteries of the nature of the universe are not in the places we see light, but in the dark regions between the stars and the galaxies, the stuff we call dark matter.

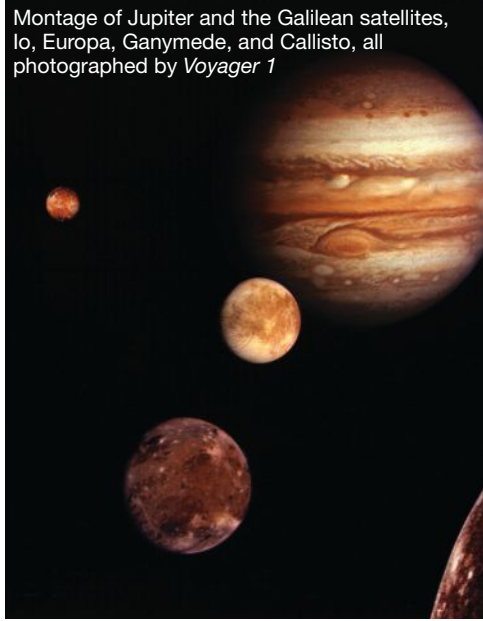
Most of the universe is not in the stars and galaxies. It's in what we can't see."

The intellectual background to the above posits two forces: expansion and collapse, which are bound in dynamic interaction (third force). Matter must collapse from primordial clouds of hydrogen and condense to form stars and planets. "This is a dynamic struggle," Taylor says, "between the gravitational force of collapse and forces that



oppose collapse; swirling motions, explosions and magnetic fields. The most puzzling of mysteries is that 96% of what makes up the universe is an ‘essence,’ which is the dark matter, revealed by the effect of its gravity on the visible universe. Most of it is a form of pure energy spread throughout the universe. This ‘dark energy’ is the real fabric of space and time. Its properties are unknown, but they determine the ultimate fate of the universe.”

The SKA objectives are ambitious. Discoveries in radio astronomy have earned Nobel Prizes. Twice in my presence Taylor has said that further Nobel Prizes will be awarded when the data from the SKA becomes available and when scientists and astronomers subject that data to analysis. “The answer to our biggest science questions will be in this data: life, the universe and everything.” The SKA will be the largest data producer in the world when fully operational. Equally huge amounts of money are being invested in developing new technologies and computing systems in order to process big data. The Inter-University Institute for Data Intensive Astronomy (IDIA) was launched in September 2015, and will oversee this important aspect of the project. Teams, institutions, and networks of people will be involved. The narrative that tells the story of the cosmos will in future not have an individual author or a singular voice. If there are Nobel Prizes in the offing, these will be awarded to multiple collaborators, not individuals. In this respect the SKA will advance new methods of doing science, which will surpass conventional systems of knowledge production. Cosmology, as we know it, is bound to change and our



Montage of Jupiter and the Galilean satellites, Io, Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto, all photographed by *Voyager 1*

orientation in the universe is liable to shift as a result.

AN INVARIANT UNIVERSE

Upon scrutiny, Galileo’s vision reveals his striving, which aims for meaning that is objective, pure, and abstract.

Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze, but the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in a language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.⁴

In pursuit of invariance and perfect forms, Galileo’s vision cannot but find distracting and problematic variability and change. In the extreme there is no place for process, paradox, and contradiction. Meaning resides in

absolutes and pure forms (Plato's *eidos*) that have an exclusively timeless derivation. Galileo's conception of the universe finds its apogee in Descartes' dualism, which by any measure is harsh, since it places thought outside the physical realm. In their cognitive framing of the world, Descartes, and Galileo before him, are light-years away from the Dawn's Heart Star. Animals are denied consciousness, for example, and are deemed to be without reason (*Cogito ergo sum*), and thus are relegated to the category of automata. Progress in science and technology through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries advanced the hegemony of a philosophy of objectification and strengthened mechanistic understanding. As a conception of the universe it stands in contrast to sensate perceptivity and lived-body experience. In this latter formulation, intellect is not alien to physicality but rather physicality and a listening body play upon intelligence and *vice versa*. As a way of being in the world it is productive of a relational ontology that emphasizes sentience and interdependence. Animals are viewed as people in mythological-time-space, for example, which in turn has ramifications for everyday practice. In numerous ways there is brutality in mechanistic leanings and the application of dualistic principals. Judged by this rationale "certain" people, in a misconceived idea of evolution (social Darwinism), were considered animals and thus less than people. Time and again this thinking justified the extermination of First People. Psychologically, this mental blindness, disassociation, and denial comes back to haunt us.

PSYCHOLOGY OF TECHNOLOGY

The dualism of Descartes, and its residual residence in science and technology, should be viewed with necessary caution. Ambivalence, even skepticism, are not abnormal but rather a healthy response. Assertions of scientific and technological "progress" become problematic, if ultimately they prove divisive and destructive. Such is the dilemma expressed by Michael Collins at a significant moment in Western technological development: *Apollo 11* awaits take off for the journey to the moon. Three American astronauts are ready to embark on perhaps the greatest technological achievement in history. The date is July 16th, 1969. Michael Collins, the command pilot, gazes down at the early morning Florida landscape. These are his impressions:

On my left is an unimpeded view of the beach below, unmarred by human totems; on my right are the most colossal piles of machinery ever assembled. If I cover my right eye, I see the Florida of Ponce de Leon, and beyond it the sea which is mother to us all. *I am the original man*. If I cover my left eye, I see civilization and technology and the United States of America and a frightening array of wires and metal. I am but one adolescent in an army which has received its marching orders.⁵

Collins describes an incapacity to integrate two powerful and contrary impressions. Why this self-reflection and return to origins before assertion and setting forth? Confronted by the colossus of technology and militarization, why does original man suddenly appear? Surely, it is because First People—original man and woman—are embedded in the psyche

Confronted by the colossus of technology and militarization, why does original man suddenly appear?

and cannot be suppressed. Time and again, First People have been physically and emotionally suppressed and oppressed. Can the Dawn's Heart Star co-exist with the speed of light, as was earlier insinuated?

Conceptually yes, but in practice the prognosis is not good, given the facts of history. With the best of intentions no amount of publicity and posturing will rectify the situation; much more is required.⁶ Psychological well-being and individuation requires meaningful integration of polarities (third force again), otherwise left and right remain divided. The universe depends on our search, with conscience, in the dark places for the sake of our souls and that of the cosmos. Invariably quarrels arise in consequence of cultural incompatibilities but there is equally a deep unifying and universal hope and healing in the concept of co-creation. Nested within co-creation is understanding, which suggests that interdependency is the fabric of existence, the acceptance of which requires responsibility and care.

The documentary record of co-creative existence is fragmentary. It is a knowledge system not highly valued in techno-industrial society and is thus relegated to the margins. Where it survives, it does so precariously in the practices and wisdom traditions of marginalized people, mostly. The Ixam story of the creation of the Milky Way gives an example of what co-creation was, and might be.

My mother was the one who told me that the girl arose; she put her hands into the wood ashes; she threw up the wood ashes into the sky. She said to the wood ashes: "The wood ashes which are here, they must altogether become the Milky Way. They must white lie along the sky, that the stars may stand outside the Milky Way, while the Milky Way is the Milky Way, while it used to be wood ashes".⁷

This is a story of metamorphosis. In it humans play a part in the transformational processes required for the formation and maintenance of the cosmos. The universe that is portrayed is not simply created from above but is elevated from below as well. Human participation is required as a fundamental principal of co-creation. The en-framing structure of the story is that the ash, which becomes the Milky Way, was formerly the roots of the !huin plant. The !huin roots, young and old, are nutritional and symbolically significant, plus they have an aesthetic purpose, imparting color to the stars. The roots, once growing in the earth, are returned to the sky. The earth's things and the sky's things are cultivated through mutuality and reciprocal exchanged. The fire burns the roots, and then the ash, which becomes the Milky Way, lights the sky. Light and energy are not static but transforming and transformational.

INSATIABLE CURIOSITY

MeerKAT, which represents one percent of the SKA, will be completed

in 2017. The next nine percent of the SKA will be finished around 2023 or 2024. With ten percent of the telescope operational there certainly will be startling revelations. The final ninety percent of SKA will be functional by 2030, “capable of answering questions about the universe that we have not even asked yet.”

Humans have a natural curiosity, which would be perfectly innocent if it were not insatiable. Betrayal can happen most insidiously at the level of identification with preferential meanings, including the myth of meaning itself. Plus, there is the automatic penchant for meaning-making, and an inability to turn away from the self-created self. Final injustice resides in a blind conceptual slant that is neglectful of co-creation. Knowledge is doomed if it cannot understand that knowledge alone is recursive, or worse, harbors the seed of its own destruction, if taken to extreme.

In the !xam world the known and the unknown were no doubt accepted as given, and death was inevitable.⁸ Nature provided but it was not a Garden of Eden. Nevertheless, the world was meaningful because a relational, co-creative way of being in the world provides assurances, fed by influences coming from beyond meaning *per se*. Individuals participated directly in a universal living order, ultimately unfathomable, in which the psyche and cosmos are not separate but rather, profoundly integrated, in ways not always obvious or easy to assess.

With the advent of the SKA there is an opportunity to pause and reflect upon aboriginal nature, once again,

and especially to consider the processes of co-creation. A cognitive shift with wide-spread acceptance is critical at this moment in time for the sake of this planet; mother to us all.⁹ The SKA is also an apt metaphor for search in general, given its operational methods: focusing on the dark regions, purposefully seeking to understand the essence of the cosmos, reaching us via signals of invisible radiation. ■

¹ !|kabbo pointed out the Dawn’s Heart Star and the astronomer George Maclear identified the Dawn’s Heart Star as Jupiter. There is convincing evidence that at least two of the Galilean satellites were visible to the !xam, aided by the ideal atmospheric conditions and by exceptional eye-sight (Koorts, W. P. (2007). The nature of the Dawn’s Heart Star. *AFRICAN SKIES/CIEUX AFRICAINS* 11 (July): 54-56.

² The Digital Bleek and Lloyd Archive <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/>.

³ UNESCO <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-8/the-bleek-collection/>.

⁴ Galileo Galilei, *IL SAGGIATORE*, 1653

⁵ Collins, M. 1974. *CARRYING THE FIRE*. pp. 359. Italics added

⁶ See, <http://www.conservation-watch.org/2016/09/09/planet-at-the-crossroads-where-are-indigenous-peoples-in-iucns-congress-theme/>, accessed 4 October, 2016. Also, Solastalgia: distress caused by environmental change <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/solastalgia-distress-caused-environmental-change-neil-rusch?trk=mp-author-card>, accessed 18 October, 2016.

⁷ Bleek W. & Lloyd L. 1911. *SPECIMENS OF BUSHMAN FOLKLORE*. pp. 73.

⁸ Rusch N. 2010. “My Heart Stands in the Hill” *Parabola* (Life after Death) Vol. 35(2), pp. 14–21.

⁹ The carbon dioxide levels in the earth’s atmosphere crossed a critical threshold of 400ppm in the latter months of 2016. What this means we don’t know, ultimately. What we do know is that it is dangerous, and likely irreversible. <http://www.sciencealert.com/earth-s-co2-levels-just-permanently-crossed-a-really-scary-threshold>, accessed 28 September, 2016.

Life Review and the Search for Meaning

Henry Fersko-Weiss

A doula is a trained professional who assists a woman, as well as her spouse and family, before, during, and after childbirth. In the passages below, the author, founder of the first End of Life Doula Program in the U.S., applies the doula principle to the act of dying and an accompanying search for meaning.

—The Editors

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE MEANING OF ONE'S LIFE arise quite naturally as a person approaches death. The questions center on how well a person feels they have lived, the things they have accomplished, how happy they were, and the impact they had on others. These questions often arrive in the middle of the night when the dying person can't sleep or in those moments when activities around them don't hold their attention. Usually, these questions do not result in a careful examination of events, because people do not appreciate the benefit of doing that. Instead, they surface and disappear in fleeting moments, like silvery fish jumping above the surface of a stream and falling back in.

Only when a person explores these questions in a serious and concerted way will they resolve the basic conflict that Erik Erikson delineated between ego integrity and despair....A dying person can either ignore that developmental challenge or face it head on. The doula approach advocates for engagement, because we have seen that successfully resolving this challenge helps a dying person achieve wisdom and peace at the end of life.

Photograph by Shreyas Malavalli. Bengaluru, India





Japanese maple at Shitennō-ji Honbō Garden in Osaka. Photograph by Laitche

Life review is the primary tool a doula uses to guide the dying person in exploring questions of meaning. One of the main theoreticians on life review was Dr. Robert Butler, who wrote about the need to process experiences from the past so that a person can reintegrate them in a positive way. Research prompted by Butler's work demonstrated that life review can reduce depression, increase life satisfaction, and promote greater acceptance of self—results that support healthy ego integrity.

In my work with dying people, I have found that the most powerful and insistent memories tend to revolve around unresolved conflicts, guilt, regret, and blame. It is easier to explore those kinds of memories after establishing a relationship of trust with a dying person. Sometimes, however, even in an initial visit, the painful memories

are right there and need to be worked on immediately. This happened during my first visit with Richard, a man in his late sixties who was dying from pancreatic cancer.

Richard's wife led me across a marble floor to an unexpectedly small living room crammed with furniture, vases, sculptures, and paintings that covered nearly every square inch of the walls from floor to ceiling. The effect was claustrophobic and dizzying, as if the room could suddenly start spinning on its own axis. Richard was huddled into one corner of a couch covered in a wild print fabric. As we went through the introductions, he handed me a framed picture of himself standing confidently on a ski slope somewhere. He was solid looking and large framed but not heavy.

I wondered if worsening pain was contributing to the urgency he felt to talk about the negatives in his life—a sense that time was running out.

“That was me before I got sick,” he said. “I hardly recognize myself now when I look in the mirror.” The man sitting on the couch looked half the size of the man in the photograph.

“You look like you belonged on the slopes,” I said.

“I was an excellent skier. Every winter I would go to Europe at some point to ski in the Alps. It was one of the ways I indulged myself,” he said, his voice heavy with nostalgia. “Now, I can hardly move off this couch to get to the bathroom. One of the few pleasures I have left is watching the leaves on the Japanese maple out there [he pointed to the one window in the room] as they dance in the wind. They look like they belong on a bird rather than a tree.”

I was sitting on a chair in front of the couch. I didn’t say anything, waiting to see if he would speak again. I could feel a pensive sadness in the slow way he spoke. It was clear that there was something on his mind that was larger than the decline in his body. As I discussed in chapter 5, during active listening, a doula will allow silence, especially in moments that seem charged—like this one did.

“I’ve been thinking about so many things in the last several days,” Richard said. “Failures from the past and regrets haunting me. How can I come to terms with that at this point? It feels overwhelming.”

So here we were, entering the zone of life review work at Richard’s initiative. When this happens as organically as it did with Richard, the doula will allow the person to control the direction of the conversation, because it comes from an urgency inside them.

“It sounds like you’re thinking about the negative things that happened in your life; things you wish you could change. Is that right?”

“Yea, it’s all the places I messed up. Maybe I’m thinking that way because I’m staring into the face of death. You can see it in my body; it’s getting closer.”

“Would you like to talk about some of that now?” I asked, still not sure if he was ready to do life review work. I wanted him to decide.

He seemed to grow smaller as he sat there, gazing once again out the window. I knew better than to interrupt the inner calculation that would lead to whatever he needed to say next. As I waited, I saw signs of physical pain play across Richard’s face. He rubbed the right side of his abdomen below the ribs. I chose not to ask him about the pain just then, because I didn’t want to divert him from his internal process. But I wondered if worsening pain was contributing to the urgency he felt to talk about the negatives in his life—a sense that time was running out.

When Richard did talk again, he started to tell me the story of his first

marriage. He had been in his mid-twenties. He said that his wife periodically experienced deep depression, which dragged him down into dark moods he had never experienced before. At some point, they had started fighting a lot. He realized after a few years of this that he didn't love her anymore, but he couldn't bring himself to end the relationship. The crucial decision points in life, those times when a person chooses one direction or another, and the reasons they make those choices, reveal a great deal. They can become the focal points in exploring meaning, and later, in expressing that meaning in a legacy project.

Choices lead to outcomes that may be positive, negative, or a combination of the two. When a person does life review work, they need to explore choices, events, and outcomes. Discussion about negative outcomes or events will reveal some of the work a person might do to resolve conflicts that stand in the way of turning toward integrity and away from despair. Talking about the positive outcomes or events will reinforce integrity and may lead to possible legacy projects. Looking at both leads to uncovering meaning.

As it turned out, it was the choices in his first marriage and their outcomes that caused Richard the greatest pain in his life. His second marriage, which had produced two daughters who were very close to him, had brought him only joy.

When a person does life review work, it helps if they cover all the periods of their life to discover the seminal experiences that drive their overall sense of success or failure. Typically, I find that the middle years of adulthood tend

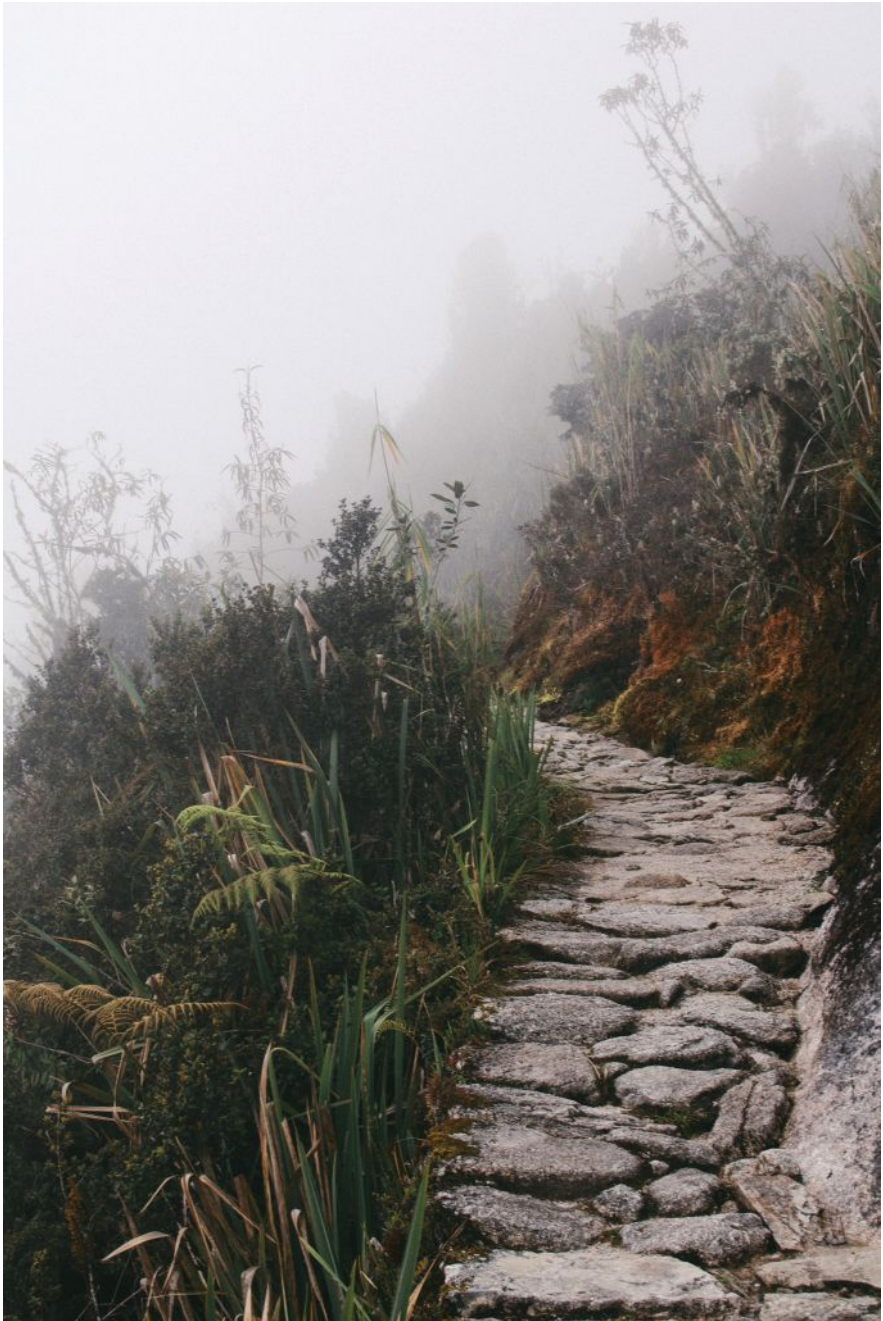
to contain more of those, so I usually start my life review there, asking questions that are pointed toward the main activities of life: work, relationships, socializing, involvement with spirituality, and time spent alone. The questions should be open-ended, such as: "Tell me about your work." "How did spirituality or religion play a part in your life?" "What felt satisfying or disappointing about the work you did?" One of the broader questions I like to ask, because it often uncovers unfinished business or unresolved conflicts, is: "What difficulties did you encounter in your middle years?"

Without me needing to ask the question, Richard had led us directly into a conversation on probably the biggest difficulty in his life. A difficulty that, when he looked back on it now, involved a series of bad choices and painful outcomes. It took us a couple of visits to fully explore those choices and outcomes. They involved having a child against his better judgment and staying in the marriage too long.

"When I finally left," Richard told me during our second visit, "my wife turned bitter and nasty. I was the sole support for them. I tried to stay involved in our daughter Jennifer's life, but my wife made that more and more difficult. By the time she was in her mid-teens, I saw Jennifer only sporadically, and she made it clear she didn't care if I visited."

"That must have been very painful," I said.

"It broke my heart. But by then I was remarried and had young children who loved having me around. At one point, due to circumstances and the demands of my successful business, I didn't see Jennifer for six months. When I thought



Photograph by John Salzarulo

about calling her, it just felt too hard, so I didn't. I only heard from Jennifer once, about five years later. It was a very angry phone call. She accused me of abandoning her and blamed me for everything that was wrong in her life. Now I haven't seen or spoken to her in

over fifteen years. This is the big failure in my life. It haunts me now as my death gets closer.”

At this point Richard looked straight at me, and I could see the suffering in his eyes. When someone is in such despair, it doesn't help to try to

Even though he kept moving toward his death, he was more alive inside.

immediately change the feelings, to find some way to soften them or push them aside, like hosing dead leaves off the walkway to your house. I knew there was much in his life to be proud of. But often when a person approaches death, it is the failures or the regrets that speak most insistently in the mind.

“I think about Jennifer all the time, like a tune you can’t stop hearing,” he said. “And the thoughts seem to get louder and more insistent. I try to think about the good things in my life, but the guilt and self-blame won’t let go of me.”

“It sounds like trying to replace your troubling thoughts with more positive ones isn’t working. Have you thought about other ways to deal with this?”

“I have thought about trying to get in touch with her. But even if I could find her, I’m terrified that she wouldn’t want anything to do with me. That would be so devastating at this point. How could I carry that into my death?”

Up to this point in our work together, my role as the doula was to help Richard explore the issue that was plaguing him and allow solutions to come from inside his struggle. Now I felt the time was right for me to make a direct suggestion that might help him move in a direction he had considered but was afraid to try.

“Of course you don’t know what could happen. But you are certainly suffering a great deal now. Taking some other action might at least let you stop beating up on yourself so much.” I placed my hand on his arm, so he could feel my support at a physical level.

“Maybe trying to get in touch directly isn’t what you need to do. Other people I have worked with who had to deal with a broken relationship found that writing a letter to the person was very helpful. Something about the familiar format of a letter makes it feel like you actually communicated, even if the letter never gets sent or the person never sees it. I know people who wrote to a parent or sibling who were no longer alive, and still it felt like they had communicated. It may let you unburden yourself more.”

This was the beginning of a process that moved Richard out of the despair he was stuck in to working toward a resolution— or at least toward easing his pain.

After writing the letter and rewriting it a couple of times, he decided to actually try to get it to Jennifer. One of his other daughters, Lisa, searched the Internet and found Jennifer’s address. So Richard sent the letter.

As we waited to see if she would respond, Richard agreed to try a visualization to release some of his guilt. I had him imagine that his guilt and shame were dark clouds that had gathered inside his chest, surrounding his heart. He could see the edges of his heart turning grey. Then, in his imagination, I came to him and handed him a jar with magic salve inside. I instructed him to rub it on his chest above his heart and watch as it turned into an opalescent light that penetrated his skin and turned the dark clouds to ones that were white and healing. He could see his heart turning

a vibrant, glowing red and feel it filled with love for those around him, for Jennifer, and for himself.

I guided Richard in this visualization many times over the next three weeks. We also continued to do the life review work. Now that he had taken action on his unfinished business regarding Jennifer, he was more available to explore other aspects of his life. If there are powerful negative issues overwhelming a person, it is difficult to have them explore the more positive parts of their life experience. Once the negative issues are addressed in some way (and just listening deeply may be enough), it becomes easier to turn from despair toward integrity. Then, discussing successes, accomplishments, and joyous events will accelerate the movement toward integrity.

When Richard finally received a letter from Jennifer, she said she would come to see him the following week. The visit was very awkward and uncomfortable for everyone. The conversation skirted the real issues between Richard and Jennifer. Through the tightness in the way Jennifer spoke, they could feel the anger inside her. As a result, the visit felt stilted and unsatisfying. Lisa walked Jennifer to the door and asked her to please come back. She told Jennifer that many times in the last few months, Richard had expressed his great sorrow over what had happened; that he desperately wanted to somehow make it different before he died.

Jennifer did come back a couple of weeks later and finally expressed her anger and hurt. Richard took it all in and told her how sorry he was to have

caused her such pain. The visit didn't resolve the feelings, but Jennifer kept visiting. During the last four months of his life, Richard was able to bring a degree of healing to his once broken relationship with Jennifer. I don't know how the relationship might have developed if they'd had more time with each other, but at least there was a relationship.

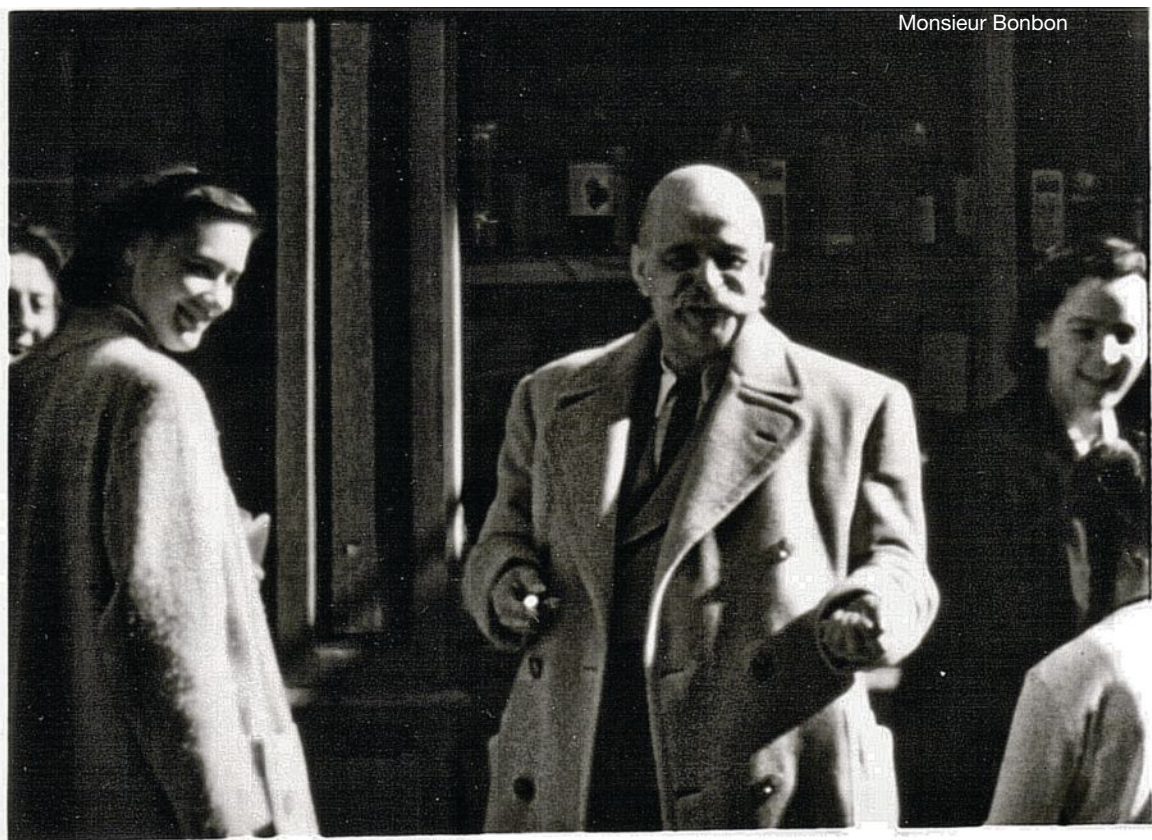
The life review work with Richard moved into new territory. He had come to an accommodation with the broken part of his past, which allowed us to talk about the things he was proud of, his most satisfying experiences, and his love of snow and the mountains. The shift in his emotional state was dramatic. Even though he kept moving toward his death, he was more alive inside.

He made a video legacy in which he spoke about the values he had tried to live, the things he had come to believe were most important in life, what he had learned—even through his mistakes and failures. He told everyone, Jennifer included, how much he loved them and what he hoped for them after he was gone.

The video was only about thirty minutes long, but it summed up his life in a powerful way. When I watched the video, Richard looked larger to me than the shrunken man I had met at my first visit—more like the image of him on the ski slope in the picture he had showed me. In the end, in spite of the great pain he had to deal with, he died very peacefully. ■

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Monsieur Bonbon



With G.I. Gurdjieff in Postwar Paris

Impersonal Kindness

Tcheslaw Tchekhovitch

Tcheslaw Tchekhovitch (1900-1958) studied with G.I. Gurdjieff (1866-1949) for decades. The following passage details experiences during the late 1940s in Paris.
-The Editors

MR. GURDJIEFF WOULD NOT ALLOW ANYONE TO SAY that he acted from kindness, yet it seemed obvious to us that he did. I frequently asked myself what the motives were behind his often unexpected actions. Did they originate from kindness, sympathy, or was there some other inner imperative?

Certainly, his motive was not kindness in the usual sentimental sense of the word. This was especially true in relation to his pupils. No, if it was kindness, it was a real kindness and outlook on everything that could only be described as something called love. It was not a personal feeling for another, but rather one that came from somewhere else. And this included his relations with his pupils. In other words, it was an opening to a sense of the sacred that he shared with others. This was quite distinct from his legendary generosity, his kindness in the ordinary sense of the term, of which we caught comical and unforgettable glimpses nearly every day.

His table was a veritable cornucopia, for no day passed without parcels of food arriving from all over the world.... Yet, if there was no one to eat with, he would often choose not to eat at all.

Since I was often with him at different times of the day, I saw in an intimate way aspects of his life that most of his pupils, who only attended the evening groups, never knew about. I have often spoken of his kindness toward me, but now I want to recall some events that I chanced to witness.

Mr. Gurdjieff often did his own shopping when he took his morning stroll. As soon as he returned, he started working in the kitchen. During this time, he would not receive any of his pupils, and the door opening onto the main staircase remained closed.

It was quite another story, however, at the back staircase. One had to see it to believe it: from the bottom of the stairs to the top, there was a long procession of beggars, parasites, and the like. One had his bowl, another his tin plate, still another an old pot, all coming solemnly to receive a full ration of soup accompanied by some kind words. Mr. Gurdjieff himself served from enormous cooking pots while asking after the health of everyone, not forgetting those who could not come because of illness. When he found out that someone was sick, he would say, "Well, let's give him something special!" and, according to the latest information he received about him, he would fill the container with some dish or other that he had prepared.

Here was an old woman who came for herself and also for her husband, who could no longer walk; there, an undernourished and sick man who said he was unable to work; then children from a large poverty-stricken family; and the concierge from a neighboring building, who had looked after a bedridden tenant on the seventh floor for a long time.

Now, an old, aristocratic Russian lady appears. She respectfully greets Mr. Gurdjieff. He takes her bowl while asking for details of her husband's health. Instead of answering directly, she starts to put on airs, to grovel, and to flatter Mr. Gurdjieff, who still does not know what food would be appropriate. He interrupts her and asks the same question again, this time more dryly. The lady finally answers, but while Mr. Gurdjieff serves her, she repeats her mundane compliments. I am embarrassed for her and make a move in her direction, wishing to make her understand that she is on dangerous ground. But, carried away by her groveling, she is totally unaware and goes on to compare the kindness of Mr. Gurdjieff with that supreme.... I do not learn which paragon of virtue she meant because he interrupts her in mid-sentence. "You, your husband, and all your kind have made your path in life by playing the role of ass-lickers, and in

spite of so many years in exile, you are still not free from that repugnant trait. It is truly sad!”

The woman begins to justify and excuse herself. Mr. Gurdjieff says to her, “Good, good, I know, it’s not your fault. Now be off with you; we still have much to do.”

The woman, offended, goes toward the door, but Mr. Gurdjieff reassures her in a warm voice, simply saying, “Till tomorrow.”

This scene was repeated every morning, the procession usually ending around one o’clock, sometimes only to start again in the evening. Mr. Gurdjieff also prepared enormous quantities of food to share with his pupils and others who regularly frequented his apartment. His table was a veritable cornucopia, for no day passed without parcels of food arriving from all over the world: the south of France, Spain, Turkey, Australia, the Americas, and even Africa. Yet, if there was no one to eat with, he would often choose not to eat at all.

As for the children, Mr. Gurdjieff never left home without filling his pockets with a good supply of bonbons and various sweets. When he came across a mother with her child, he always offered a bonbon to the little one. If the child offered it to his mother, he gave him two more. But if the child did not offer anything, that was all he received. If the mother hid the sweet to give to the child later, she was offered more too. In the district where he took his regular walk, he was well known to all the children and those who accompanied them. He was a kind of Father Christmas, and was called “Monsieur Bonbon.”

The reader may be irritated by what appears to be a blind attachment and

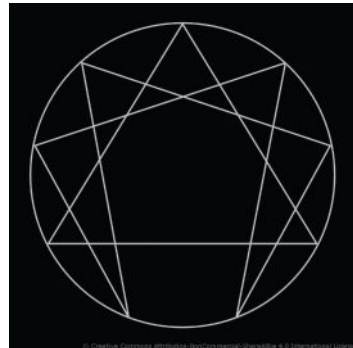
unreserved partiality on my part. If so, please excuse a devotion that may seem excessive. One has to imagine how living near him shattered all habitual forms: one found oneself literally entering into the world of myth. We all experienced this same feeling.

After Mr. Gurdjieff’s death, I witnessed many touching scenes. For example, an old woman came to the apartment about three weeks later. Overcome by the news that he was no longer there, she could only say, “And now, how shall I pay my rent?” Someone else came and said, “I would so much liked to have thanked him. He paid for my daughter’s treatment, and she has just come out of the sanatorium, cured.” After hearing of Mr. Gurdjieff’s death, one man collapsed into an armchair, remained silent for ten minutes, and then murmured, “To come from South Africa and learn this. How sad.” And he left.

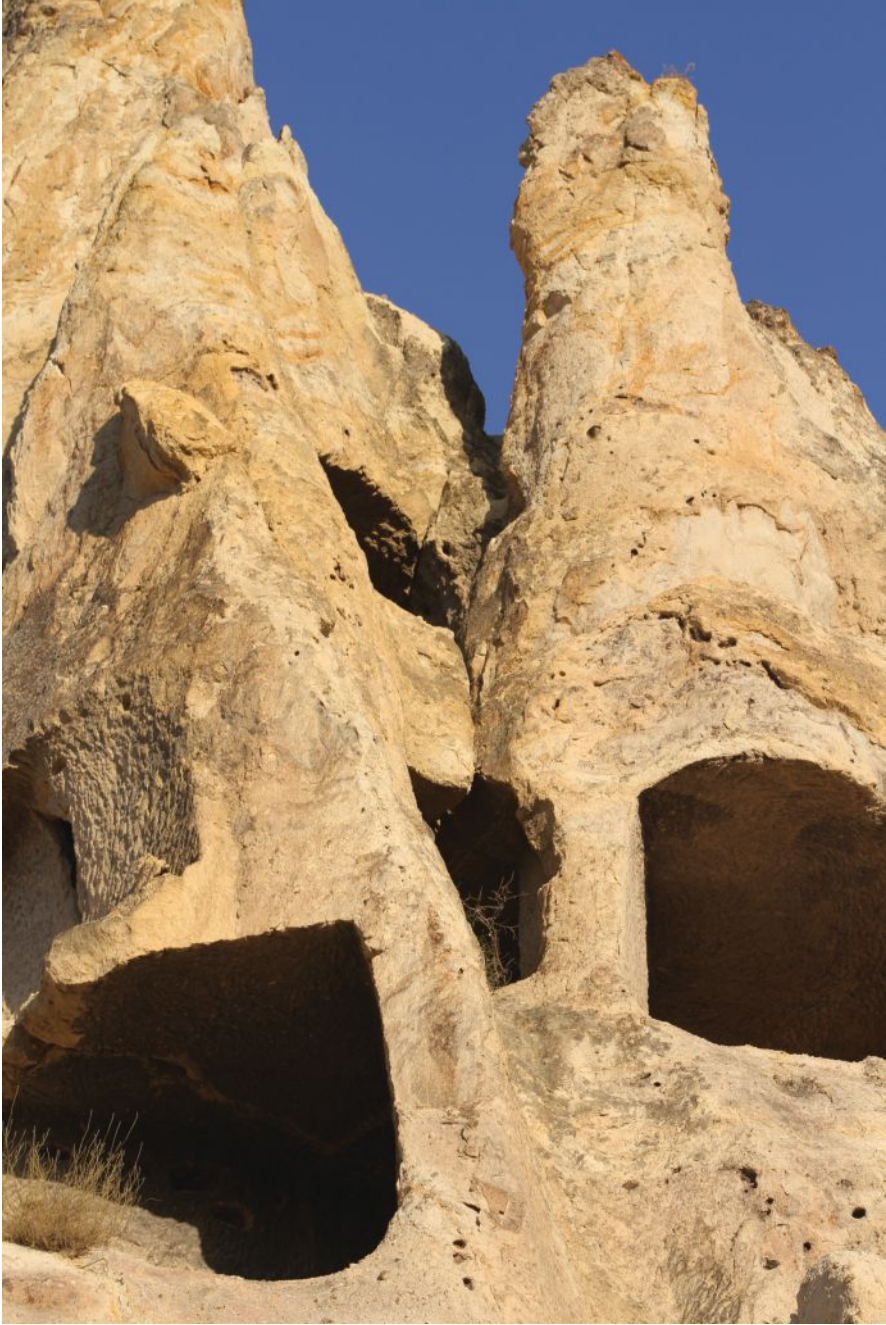
And I thought to myself, “Yes, how sad, how sad not to have known him; but more, how sad to have known him and not to have understood him. And above all, how sad to have understood him and not to have served his work.”

Reprinted by permission from Tcheslaw Tchekhovitch’s *GURDJIEFF: A MASTER IN LIFE* (Dolmen Meadows Editions, 2006).

Enneagram, sacred symbol introduced to the West by Gurdjieff



Cave church in Göreme, Cappadocia, Turkey. Photograph by José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro



In a Turkish cave, an ancient way toward God

Towards a Christian Tantra

James Hughes Reho

Tantra is the hot blood of spiritual practice. It smashes the taboo against unreasonable happiness; a thunderbolt path, swift, joyful, and fierce.

—Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

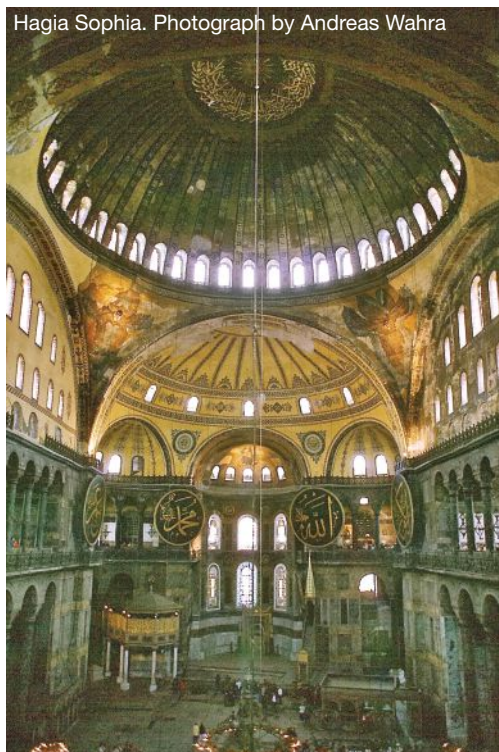
And I say: can [those], who have in [their] hearts the Divine Fire of the Holy Spirit burning naked, not be set on fire, not shine and glitter and not take on the radiance of the Deity in the degree of [their] purification and penetration by fire?

—St. Simeon the New Theologian

Set as jewels within the fairy chimney rock formations of the high desert of central Turkey, historic hermit caves dot the mountainsides of Göreme, Cappadocia. I came to these caves nursing a recent disappointment. Only a week before I had been in Istanbul (ancient Constantinople) and had gone to the great Hagia Sophia church there. This church, largely unknown to Western Christians, was the central church of Christendom for over a thousand years and serves still today as the model for nearly every mosque built around the world. Hagia Sophia had been “the holy of holies” of the Christian world, long before St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome took central stage in the West. Hagia Sophia had been the church of Byzantine emperors and ecumenical patriarchs. Its mosaics are rightly among the most famous and recognizable works of art in the Christian world.

For years I had dreamed about the day I might visit the Hagia Sophia. In my fantasy I had imagined walking into this great and beautiful sacred space and being struck with awe, being overtaken by the living presence of God, never to be the same again. I can still remember my expectation, the openness of my heart and spirit, as I entered this great mother of churches through the patriarchal door. My eyes were wide with wonder, and I felt my heart quicken. I crossed the threshold and breathed in the fragrance of the place. And nothing happened. The stirring beauty of the mosaics, the imposing grandeur and opulence of the space, the dizzying domes and cacophony of ancient items, like the pre-Christian baptismal font taken from a healing center dedicated to the god Asclepius, were all as I had hoped, even more so—and yet that burning presence I sought, which in my imagination lived particularly here, eluded me.

A week later, warm in the dry heat and bright sun of the Anatolian high desert, I was climbing into the small caves inhabited by early Christian ascetics in Göreme. Some of these caves were barely large enough to lie down or walk around in. Others could fit a small gathering. They served as home, chapel, and study for the early hermits and mystics who spent their lives here seeking union with God through spiritual practices, silence, and devotion. The fragrance of these spiritual seekers still lingered on the cave walls and in the desert air. The dry climate of Cappadocia has preserved the crude holy icons and textual fragments they had chalked on the walls of their hollowed-out cells over a thousand years ago, making each cave a unique devotional space created through the synergy of nature and monk. Toward the end of the day, my



companions and I were brought by our guide (it was mandatory to have an official guide) to one of the refectories, or dining rooms, of these early monastics. The dining room in its entirety consisted of two parallel troughs of about twenty feet in length and three feet in depth; it was a study in minimalism. The ascetics would sit on the ground, their lower legs in the trough as if they were on a chair, with the ground between the troughs serving as their dining table.

I was gripped with an urge to sit there, to take a seat at this table where so many spiritual seekers had taken their scarce amounts of food before returning to their holy work of solitude. Our guide was clear that we were to look but not touch. Being a bit of a scofflaw, I lingered toward the back of our group as the guide began to move on, waiting for him and my ten travel companions to round a bend. Then I walked straight for the refectory and sat on the ground with my legs in the trough

and elbows on the table, as countless others had done before me.

Immediately, I experienced what felt like a lightning bolt coming from the ground beneath my seat and moving up through my body with speed and power. With this lightning came a revelation, which I heard from somewhere like the pit of my guts or the center of the earth: The people at the Hagia Sophia are not your ancestors. These people are your ancestors. I began to shake and felt like I was strangely overheating. Sweat poured out from every pore, and I think I blacked out for a while. I don't remember rising from my seat. It took me quite a while before I tried to share what had happened to me, since at the time I had no idea what this message meant.

These people are your ancestors. There exists another lineage, another stream that was outside, or maybe underneath, the power and grandeur that had been the Hagia Sophia in its prime. Tracing this stream, we find it leads us back to the original wellspring of Jesus and the early communities that gathered around his presence, before and after his death. At certain points in history, this stream has been a roaring river, bringing life and refreshment to many; at other times, it has been an underground aquifer, all but invisible.

Writers of the first centuries of the Common Era who swam in and drank from this stream used the thought-language of their time to relate their experience. They redefined the terms of Neoplatonic philosophy in an attempt to express a reality that was in many important ways contrary to the views of Neoplatonic mysticism.¹ In the same way, the initial generations of Jesus'

followers appropriated the titles of Roman power used to describe Augustus Caesar, such as "Son of God" and "Savior" and even "Virgin-born," to express a very different picture of power antithetical to Rome and her Caesars. In the long run, this antilanguage was only somewhat successful. Over time, the paradox and protest that informed the early Christian use of Neoplatonic and imperial Roman language was largely lost. Christian spirituality fell prey to the world-denying and body-negative views of the ascetic Neoplatonists, just as Christ himself became more and more fused with the imperial Roman god Sol Invictus (the Unconquerable Sun).

The mystical Christianity that I tasted among its own artifacts at Göreme had thrived largely outside the official institution symbolized by large structures such as the Hagia Sophia. This lineage is not rooted in imperial power or Sol Invictus. It is rooted in a way of seeing that parallels the insights of Eastern Tantra, though from within a Christian framework.

THE REST BETWEEN TWO NOTES

As I began a more focused exploration of the meaning of what had happened to me at the Göreme refectory, I quickly ran into a problem. It became clear that much classical Christian language that might have been used to speak about the deep revelations of the mystical tradition had been drastically redefined or had become loaded with dogmatic baggage and strange associations from more modern expressions of the faith such as

*We can experience the Divine,
but we cannot fully circumscribe the Divine
with names, definitions, or categories.*

evangelicalism or biblical fundamentalism. In searching for a vocabulary to express the unique and often surprising insights of this mystical Christianity, I found that the traditional religious language of the Christian household was, paradoxically, not always the best choice. I began to explore other vocabularies.

During this same period of searching, I had a series of powerful visions (some recounted in this book) that included both Christian and Hindu imagery. These visions brought up new questions for me. For instance, what did it mean for me as a Christian person to have a vision that included both Jesus and the goddess Durga, and led me to an experience of the Divine that seemed to move beyond the parameters of either? I meditated upon these visions and discussed them with my own spiritual mentors, who both affirmed that such experiences could be part of a genuine Christian path and helped me come to realize that the substance of these visions would be significantly flattened if limited to only one tradition's iconography. Our pluralistic world allows for the interplay of such images in ways that are still faithful to one's root tradition, just as in its early days Christianity engaged the art and deities of older traditions in fruitful ways. In my own case, the insights and images of the Eastern world, particularly of Indian and Tibetan Tantra, had been very alive for me from the time of my

childhood, and formed the center of my university studies.

Now it seemed that I was being called to inhabit both worlds, to allow Tantra and mystical Christianity to coexist in my heart. Bearing authentic witness to what was coming alive within me, I sought for the clearest and most useful way of expressing the truths of mystical Christianity within our own historical particularity. This work drew me into an exploration of the resonances and parallels between Tantra and Christianity. Two lines that are parallel travel in the same direction but never overlap: each remains its own reality. Yet honoring the space between them makes their resonances all the more informative. There is a pregnant silence between the unique notes (languages) of Tantra and Christianity. It is that silence between the two notes that makes them into music, and holds the promise of a deeper sounding. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke has written,

*I am the rest between two notes,
Which, struck together, sound discordantly,
Because death's note would claim a higher
key.*

*But in the dark pause, trembling, the notes
meet, harmonious.*

And the song continues sweet.²

Many Christians in the past, limited by their cultural isolation or lack of mutual sharing with other faiths, may have had a cultural or tribal reaction against difference and understood their faith in an exclusionary way. Today, deep interspiritual sharing made possible



through modern pluralistic environments leads many of us to see that all these traditions can be other, legitimate faces of the Divine Mystery that carry learnings for us all. Each religious tradition offers a particular culturally conditioned picture of our relationship with the Divine. The Divine reality, transcategorical in itself, can only be perceived through categories: that is, through our own historical, cultural, embodied particularity. And one distinctive particularity can be fructified by engaging another, especially in a culturally complex world.

Stories and fables that are of universal appeal tend to cross into many different cultures. The story of the blind men and the elephant is one such story, and it is found in various Asian and European forms. In a Jain version of this fable, six blind men are asked to encounter and

describe an elephant. One, grasping a leg of the elephant, says, “It is like a pillar.” Another, holding its tail, affirms an elephant is like a rope. A third man, running his hands along the elephant’s trunk, says it is like a tree branch. The fourth man, stroking the ear of the elephant, says it is like a hand fan. The fifth feels the belly of the elephant and believes it is like a wall, while the last man, holding the tusk, claims an elephant is like a solid pipe. After some confusion, a king explains to the blind men that each, in fact, is right, though none of their accounts is complete. It would not be possible for any single one of them to fully describe an elephant; each, however, could assert something true and meaningful from the position of his own engagement with the elephant through his distinctive particularity.



Moses before the Burning Bush. Gebhard Fugel, c. 1920.
Diözesanmuseum, Freising, Germany

It is through the particular, the conditioned, the finite, that truth can be known; and it is because of the nature of this knowing as conditioned and finite and arising within a given context that this knowing cannot be total. According to Jain thought, an object of knowledge has an infinite number of facets (Sanskrit: *anekantatmaka*) and what we come to know is partial, not complete. Complete knowledge, according to the Jain theory of partial predication (*syadvada*), would only be possible in the hypothetical situation in which every singular viewpoint is considered on an absolutely equal footing with every other.

Resonating with this sense of the Divine as beyond full knowability is the story from the Hebrew scriptures in which Moses encounters the presence of God in a bush that burns but is not

consumed (Exodus³). When Moses asks God for God's name, God responds, "I am who I am" (or, "I will be who I will be"). In this cryptic response, God offers Moses something beyond a definition. God lets Moses into the very heart of God, which exceeds all categories and names. So we can experience the Divine, but we cannot fully circumscribe the Divine with names, definitions, or categories.

As a modern parallel, John Hick, a modern philosopher of religion, asserts that our absolute truth claims about God are in fact absolute claims about our perceptions of God; our religious knowledge is culturally and historically conditioned. Such conditioned paths provide various ways to genuinely experience the Divine, yet also prevent our reflection on this experience from ever being objectively definitive; that is,

*We can enhance our perceptions through
hearing the perceptions of others,
shared in open and respectful dialogue.*

the Divine is never fully knowable. As we can only approach the Divine through our distinctive cultural and religious particulars,³ no one faith can claim to have a monopoly on describing the elephant, and every spiritual tradition can benefit from the experience of others.

Our particularity also includes our bodies, minds, and emotional patterns. The Divine, which transcends all categories, is our elephant. To enhance how we know the elephant, we can productively engage the knowledge that has emerged from other differing and distinctive contexts. It's important to be clear that we are not saying that at some point we can gather enough blind men and women to know the elephant in its entirety, or to know some universal or Platonic elephant divorced from the experiences of the blind men. We never fully know the elephant, at least not when that elephant is the Divine. We can, however, come to a very deep knowledge of our own perceptions of the elephant, and we can enhance our perceptions through hearing the perceptions of others, shared in open and respectful dialogue. Perhaps we come to assimilate two such sets of experiences and perceptions. Such a process can open a living space within us where resonances arising from a plurality of belongings enhance our own native tradition and help us understand it and express it in new and

life-giving ways that are still faithful to its particular genius.

It is in this context that we will lift up certain resonances that Christian mysticism has with the Tantra of the East. It is in this context that we will look to the vocabulary, images, and even deities drawn from the world of Tantra to clarify, through correlation, the path of Christian transformation. Our hope is to offer an invitation into this exciting, blissful, and powerful path in a way relevant for today's seeker and devoid of the unwanted and unhelpful baggage of the past that would only confuse the simple but profound and life-giving truths of the Christian mystical path. Our hope is that as we explore a Christian Tantra we will dust off jewels in our mystical treasure house that have been buried for centuries, and place them in new settings that will not only bring us greater joy and vitality and peace than we have ever known, but will encourage and enliven us to be of deep service to the world. ■

¹ Vladimir Lossky, *THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY OF THE EASTERN CHURCH* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 32.

² Rainier Maria Rilke, *POEMS FROM THE BOOK OF HOURS*, trans. Babette Deutsch (New York: New Directions, 1975), 21.

³ For more on John Hick and religious pluralism, see John Hick, *AN INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION: HUMAN RESPONSES TO THE TRANSCENDENT*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

The I Ching and Synchronicity

Annette Lowe

JUNG WAS LARGELY RESPONSIBLE for making the I Ching known to the Western world. He did so by writing the foreword to Richard Wilhelm's translation of the I Ching into German, in 1929. This "contributed in no small measure to the acceptance of the book in Western intellectual circles." The English edition, retranslated by Cary Baynes, appeared in 1949. When approached by Wilhelm, Jung had already known the I Ching for some years, and was fascinated by it. In *MEMORIES, DREAMS, REFLECTIONS* he says:

I would sit for hours beneath the hundred year-old pear tree, the I Ching beside me, practising the technique by referring the resultant oracles to one another in an interplay of questions and answers. All sorts of undeniably remarkable results emerged—meaningful connections with my own thought processes which I could not explain to myself.

Jung and Wilhelm met in the early 1920s. Richard Wilhelm was a theologian and missionary, who lived in China for twenty-five years. His knowledge of the Chinese language enabled him to translate the I Ching and other classical works into German. Translations from German into English and other languages soon followed....

The I Ching, or Book of Changes, is one of the first efforts of the human mind to place itself within the universe. The I Ching portrays the changing balance between the forces of *yin* and *yang*.

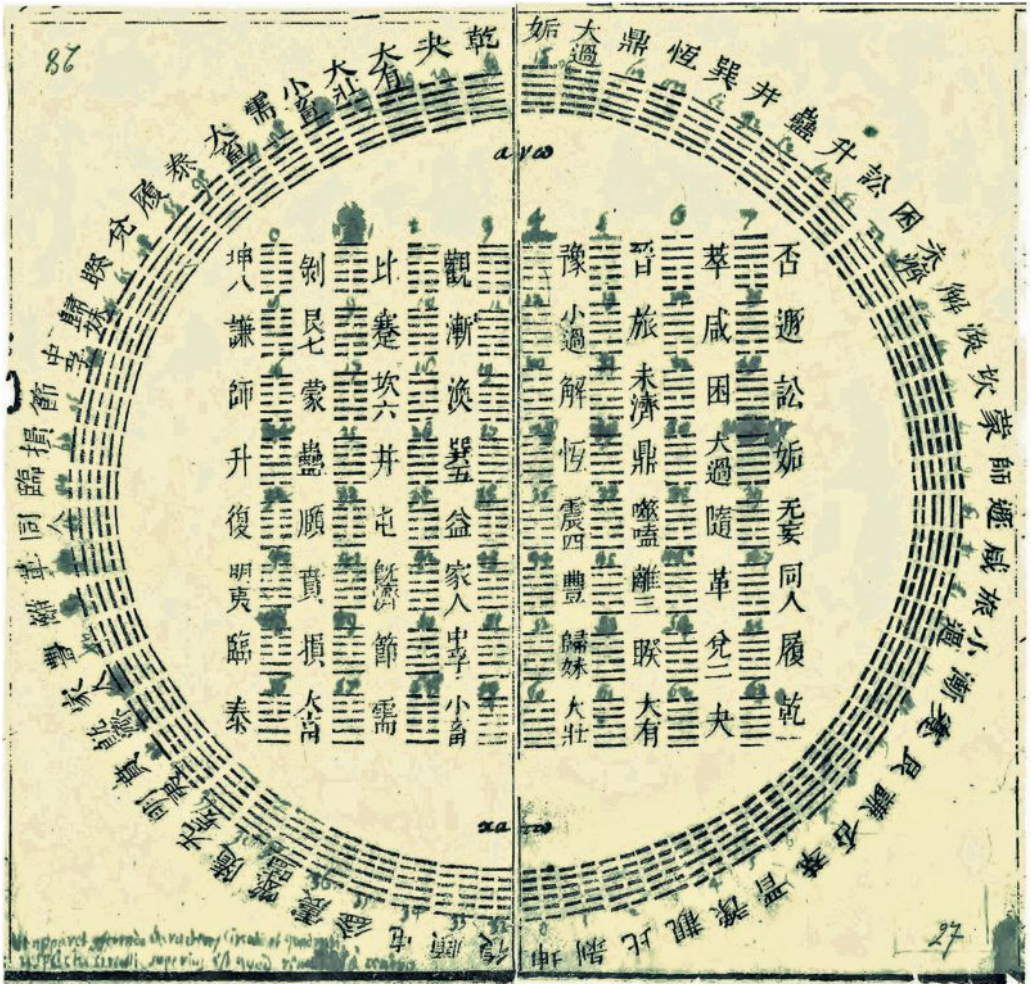


Diagram of I Ching hexagrams owned by the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, 1701

Yin is represented by a broken line, and *yang* by an unbroken line. There are eight sets of three lines. One set has three unbroken lines, another three broken lines. Three more have one broken line, at the bottom, in the middle or at the top. The last three have one unbroken line at the bottom, in the middle or the top. Each reading consists of two hexagrams, an upper and a lower, so that the I Ching offers 8 x 8, i.e., 64 possible readings, or

typical situations. A basic interpretation relates to the force of *yin* or *yang* rising through the lines. So a reading with five *yang* lines, and a single *yin* line at the top, would suggest that *yin* energy is dying away and *yang* energy is almost completely dominant. This particular reading (no. 43) is called “Breakthrough” in many translations. The Book of Changes provides interpretations of each reading, and of each line in the reading.

The questioner throws three coins together, six times, and notes how many “heads” or “tails” are shown on the coins after each throw. The questioner looks up the result in a table which indicates the relevant reading to be consulted. According to the old tradition, it is “‘spiritual agencies,’ acting in a mysterious way, that...give a meaningful answer.” In Jung’s view, the reading simply mirrors the questioner’s inner situation in some way. Even in English translation, the various interpretations may seem obscure. They are full of unfamiliar imagery relating to life in ancient China. The questioner needs some imagination in order to grasp a meaning that is relevant. For example, I might ask, “Should I change my job?” If I receive reading no. 48, “The Well,” I will read that the well remains in the middle of the town and provides water for all who go to it. I could interpret this as “Stay where you are, you are doing useful work.”

Jung acknowledges that a Western psychologist might say that Jung had projected his own unconscious contents into the interpretation of the hexagram. Yet that is exactly its value: to function as a mirror for our as-yet unrealized thoughts.

Too often Westerners use the I Ching to predict what will happen in a particular situation, as a means of fortune-telling. This is not its purpose. The I Ching simply shows how things are for the questioner in this moment when the coins are thrown; it shows the psychic energies available at this moment. As Jung puts it, “The I Ching presupposes that there is a synchronistic correspondence between the psychic

state of the questioner and the answering hexagram.”

Synchronicity is most easily defined as “a meaningful coincidence.” It is “a coincidence in time of two or more causally unrelated events which have the same or a similar meaning.” Or again: “the simultaneous occurrence of a certain psychic state with one or more external events which appear as meaningful parallels to the momentary subjective state.” Marie-Louise von Franz provides a helpful example:

If an aircraft crashes before my eyes as I am blowing my nose, this is a coincidence of events that has no meaning. It is simply a chance occurrence of a kind that happens all the time. But if I bought a blue frock and, by mistake, the shop delivered a black one on the day one of my near relatives died, this would be a meaningful coincidence. The two events are not causally related, but they are connected by the symbolic meaning that our society gives to the colour black.

Jung gives an example. He was working with a young woman and talking about her dream of a golden scarab, when a European form of scarab beetle started knocking itself against the window pane, “which contrary to its usual habits had evidently felt an urge to get into a dark room at this particular moment.” Jung pointed out the parallel, and the shock of the coincidence was enough to disturb her rigidly rational attitude and allow the process of transformation to begin. Jung notes that the scarab is an Egyptian symbol of rebirth. The dead sun-god changes himself into a scarab and “mounts the barge which carries the rejuvenated sun-god into the morning sky.”

So the I Ching is based on synchronicity. In fact, it is synchronicity

Synchronicity merely indicates that the coincidence of two events demonstrates a meaning, and it is a meaning of which the individual was not previously aware.

which is the real intellectual bombshell, and its implications have not yet been absorbed into Western thinking.

Synchronicity does not attribute cause and effect to events, it stands beyond causality. Synchronicity merely indicates that the coincidence of two events demonstrates a meaning, and it is a meaning of which the individual was not previously aware.

G. Bright understands Jung to say that “if meaningful coincidences cannot

be explained causally, then the connecting principle must lie in the ‘equal significance’ of parallel events.” So when two events create a meaningful coincidence, the symbolic meaning that they have in common is the meaning of the synchronicity. Obviously no interpretation of cause and effect is possible. Bright quotes Jung: “Causality is only one

principle, and psychology...cannot be exhausted by causal methods only, because the mind lives by aims as well.” These are ultimately the aims of the Self, driving the development of the individual’s personality towards wholeness. So a synchronicity, and its meaning for the individual, is the Self’s effort to further that individual’s personality development, little by little.

Obviously we cannot know in detail where the Self is leading us; we can only

assimilate the meaning of the momentary synchronicity. For work in therapy or analysis, this means that any interpretations can only be provisional. No-one can presume to know the truth, and therapy or analysis must always be a joint search for meaning. This accords with the view that no symbol can ever be fully known, and can always produce further meanings.

The psyche stretches out towards infinity. As

Scarab Cartouche of Thutmose III from Karnak temple of Amun-Ra, Egypt. Photograph by Chiswick Chap





Carl Gustav Jung, Zurich, 1910

Jung puts it, “the psyche, in its deepest reaches, participates in a form of existence beyond space and time, and thus partakes of what is symbolically described as ‘eternity.’”

The Self does not only exist within the individual psyche: the Self is collective. The individual simply has access to the Self. The Self can be described as having one face turned towards the transpersonal, and another

face turned towards the individual personality. When the Self initiates a synchronistic meaning, that meaning must first exist in the collective or transpersonal realm. The meaning is conveyed to the individual psyche only by the synchronistic event.

Our Western minds rebel against this idea. We have always assumed that meaning is latent in the psyche of the individual. If this were true for

synchronicity, then we would have to say that the synchronicity was somehow brought about by the individual. The implication would be that the individual psyche works on matter, e.g., on the way the I Ching coins fall. Yet only spoon-benders have ever been able to change matter through the mind. Usually it is magical thinking that deludes us into believing that we can influence matter or events simply by imagining, or by superstitious actions. In magical thinking, we believe that our thoughts can affect the external world. That is impossible. So we cannot say that the meaning within a synchronicity exists within the individual psyche.

Well, if the individual mind does not shape a synchronicity, what does? When a synchronicity occurs, archetypal energies have influenced matter, and perhaps events in time as well. Synchronicity clearly demonstrates that archetypal activity has the capacity to affect both psyche and matter. Such activity specifically occurs outside the conscious realm, and outside the will of the individual. Both are excluded from such activity. Jung called the archetype which straddles both matter and psyche the psychoid archetype. It is the psychoid archetype—prompted by the Self—that produces a synchronicity....

Once that link between mind and body was established, the study of psychosomatic illness blossomed in the twentieth century. The reader is referred to the article in this book on homeopathy, a healing that works first on the spiritual level and permeates to the physical level.

An indirect form of support for these ideas of Jung's came from the science of atomic physics. The theories of quantum mechanics were

developing early in the twentieth century, at the time when Jung was developing his own ideas. Quantum mechanics, also known as quantum physics or quantum theory is, according to Wiki, "the body of scientific principles that explains the behaviour of matter and its interactions with energy on the scale of atoms and subatomic particles." Atomic scientists discovered that the electrons in an atom can move in unpredictable ways. This research shattered Newtonian laws of cause and effect, which had dominated science for the previous two hundred years. The concept of acausality began to emerge in atomic research.

Science students will know that in an atom, electrons rotate around the nucleus in a series of orbits. When an electron takes on an extra charge of energy (when heat or electricity is applied to the substance), the electron moves up to a higher orbit for a time. This is known as a "quantum leap." It then falls back to its previous orbit, emitting its added energy as a photon of light.

But significantly, when an atom is energised it cannot be predicted whether any given electron in it will traverse, for example, from one orbit to another by going from its home orbit to a higher orbit level directly, or by stopping along the way at intermediate orbits.

So the quantum leaps of an electron seem to be acausal.

It was not only acausality, but also the idea of the psychoid archetype that fitted the new theories of atomic physics. One of the leading researchers, Wolfgang Pauli, worked in analysis with Jung, and the two men maintained a friendly correspondence. Pauli expresses one of

the laws of the new physics that “the consistent investigator of the unknown interior of the atom could not help seeing that the nature of the observing process



Wolfgang Pauli, 1945

becomes perceptible in the disturbance caused by the observation.” This is a scientific expression of the link between psyche and matter, or the psychoid archetype.

Jung had a strong influence on Pauli’s later work. “Pauli became intensely interested in developing a new perspective that brought together physics with Jung’s analytical psychology yet transcended them both.” Since Einstein’s time, it had been known that light behaves as both a wave and a particle. The more light is measured as a wave, the less light seems like a particle. Put more scientifically,

...objects have complementary properties that cannot be measured at the same time. The more accurately one property is measured, the less accurately the complementary property is measured.

Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr made an interpretation of the meaning of quantum mechanics between 1925 and 1927. This is known as the Copenhagen interpretation. Again, a link between matter and psyche is implied.

According to the Copenhagen interpretation, physical systems generally do not have definite properties prior to being measured, and quantum mechanics can only predict the probabilities that measurements will produce certain results. The act of measurement affects the system, causing

the set of probabilities to reduce to only one of the possible values immediately after the measurement. This feature is known as wave function collapse.

Pauli believed that this principle also existed in the psyche. As he says,

...the concepts “conscious and ‘unconscious’ seem[s] to offer a pretty close analogy to the “complementarity” situation in physics. Every “observation of the unconscious,” i.e., every conscious realisation of unconscious contents, has an uncontrollable reactive effect on these same contents....

This inner and outer “mirroring” of the complementarity principle was, Pauli believed, an important step forward in reconciling the opposites of physics and the psyche.

So far, the definition of synchronicity used in this article has been, “the coincidence of a psychic state in the observer with a simultaneous, objective, external event that corresponds to the psychic state or content (e.g., the scarab).” Where there is no evidence of a causal connection between the psychic state and the external event, Jung adds two other categories of synchronicity. One is the coincidence of a psychic state and an external event occurring at a distance. For example I may dream of my cousin’s car crash at the time it occurs—in a foreign country.

The other category is the coincidence of a psychic state and an external event occurring at a distance in time. For example I may have a strong intuition that my cousin should not drive while she is travelling in Europe. Two weeks later, she has a car crash. These second two categories can also be described as forms of telepathy. Jung points out that the “psychic state” of telepathic

perceptions “occur as if in part there were no space, in part no time”. He suggests an explanation:

In man's original view of the world, as we find it among primitives, space and time have a very precarious existence. They became 'fixed' concepts only in the course of his mental development, thanks largely to the introduction of measurement. In themselves, space and time consist of nothing. They are hypostatized concepts born of the discriminating activity of the conscious mind, and they form the indispensable co-ordinate for describing the behaviour of bodies in motion. They are, therefore, essentially psychic in origin....

Fascinatingly, Einstein's theory of relativity includes the concept that “Measurements of various quantities are relative to the velocities of observers. In particular, space contracts and time dilates.” Of course the implications of all this are all highly speculative.

The I Ching remains popular in the West, but the world view on which it is based has had a far deeper influence on Western culture. The I Ching has played its part in helping Westerners to understand the unity of existence,

...that the outer world is also a subject and when we experience our own personality being reoriented through the meaningful activity of material events in the outer world, we soften. The outer world is no longer something to act on and control, it is a place asking us for a relationship....

Further:

For more and more people, the spirit no longer comes down from above. It emerges up from matter and is there for those who are willing to accept the earth's

complication and see the spirit in the storms body and matter throw at us. This is Jung's contribution to us and our time. |

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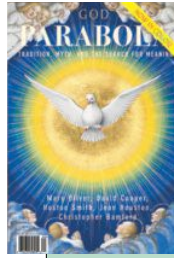
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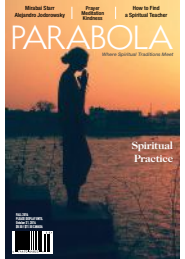
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Oscar Wilde's cell in Reading Gaol as it looked in September 2016

The gods had given him almost everything....

You Will Find It Waiting for You

Oscar Wilde

In 1895, Oscar Wilde, the most celebrated literary figure of his age, was convicted of “gross indecency” for homosexual activity and was sentenced to two years in prison. While behind bars, Wilde wrote a fifty-thousand word letter to his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, later published as the book DE PROFUNDIS. What follows is a brief excerpt from that work.

—The Editors

THE GODS HAD GIVEN ME ALMOST EVERYTHING. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a *flâneur*, a dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with the smaller natures and the meaner minds. I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the housetop. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility.

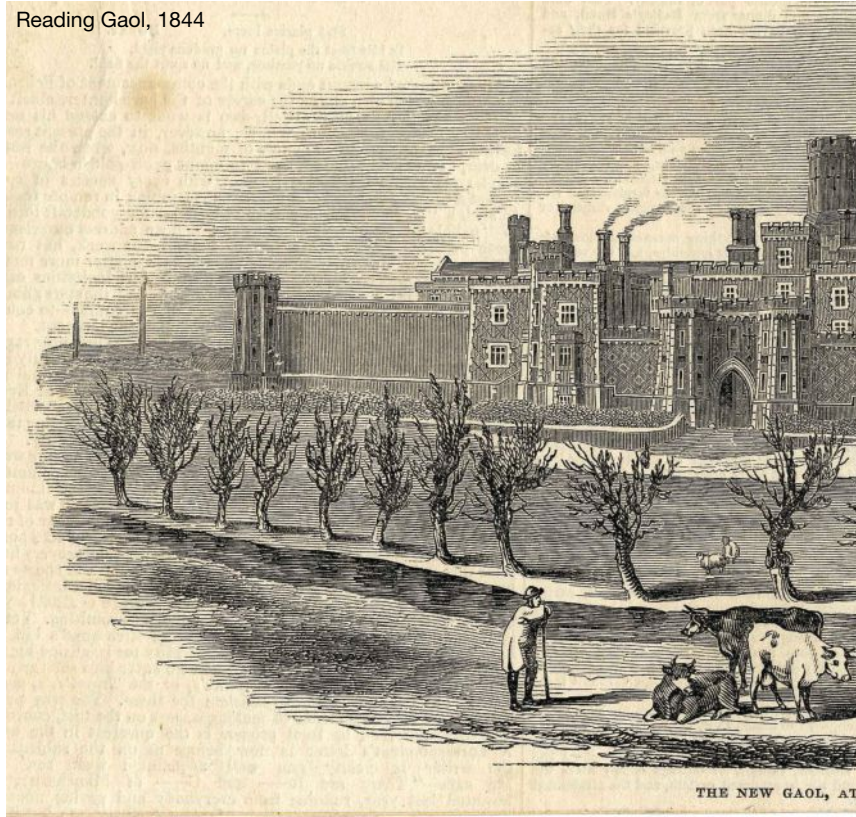
I have lain in prison for nearly two years. Out of my nature has come wild despair; an abandonment to grief that was piteous even to look at; terrible and impotent rage; bitterness and scorn; anguish that wept aloud; misery that could find no voice; sorrow that was dumb. I have passed through every possible mood of suffering. Better than Wordsworth himself I know what Wordsworth meant when he said—

Suffering is permanent, obscure, and dark
And has the nature of infinity.

But while there were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless, I could not bear them to be without meaning. Now I find hidden somewhere away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all. That something hidden away in my nature, like a treasure in a field, is Humility.

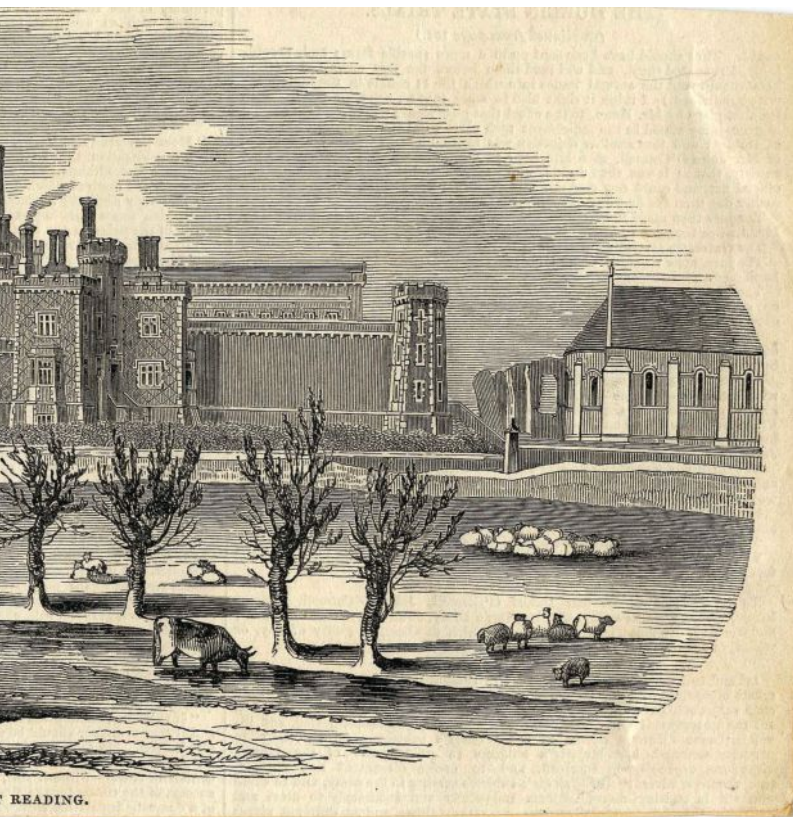
It is the last thing left in me, and the best: the ultimate discovery at which I have arrived, the starting-point for a fresh development. It has come to me right out of myself, so I know that it has come at the proper time. It could not

Reading Gaol, 1844



have come before, nor later. Had any one told me of it, I would have rejected it. Had it been brought to me, I would have refused it. As I found it, I want to keep it. I must do so. It is the one thing that has in it the elements of life, of a new life, *Vita Nuova* for me. Of all things it is the strangest. One cannot acquire it, except by surrendering everything that one has. It is only when one has lost all things, that one knows that one possesses it.

Now I have realized that it is in me, I see quite clearly what I ought to do; in fact, must do. And when I use such a phrase as that, I need not say that I am not alluding to any external sanction or command. I admit none. I am far more of an individualist than I ever was. Nothing seems to me of the smallest value except what one gets out of oneself. My nature is seeking a fresh



heart. The external things of life seem to me now of no importance at all. You can see to what intensity of individualism I have arrived—or am arriving rather, for the journey is long, and “where I walk there are thorns.”

Of course I know that to ask alms on the highway is not to be my lot, and that if ever I lie in the cool grass at night-time it will be to write sonnets to the moon. When I go out of prison, R— will be waiting for me on the other side of the big iron-studded gate, and he is the symbol, not

mode of self-realization. That is all I am concerned with. And the first thing that I have got to do is to free myself from any possible bitterness of feeling against the world.

I am completely penniless, and absolutely homeless. Yet there are worse things in the world than that. I am quite candid when I say that rather than go out from this prison with bitterness in my heart against the world, I would gladly and readily beg my bread from door to door. If I got nothing from the house of the rich I would get something at the house of the poor. Those who have much are often greedy; those who have little always share. I would not a bit mind sleeping in the cool grass in summer, and when winter came on sheltering myself by the warm close-thatched rick, or under the penthouse of a great barn, provided I had love in my

merely of his own affection, but of the affection of many others besides. I believe I am to have enough to live on for about eighteen months at any rate, so that if I may not write beautiful books, I may at least read beautiful books; and what joy can be greater? After that, I hope to be able to recreate my creative faculty.

But were things different: had I not a friend left in the world; were there not a single house open to me in pity; had I to accept the wallet and ragged cloak of sheer penury: as long as I am free from all resentment, hardness and scorn, I would be able to face the life with much more calm and confidence than I would were my body in purple and fine linen, and the soul within me sick with hate.

And I really shall have no difficulty. When you really want love you will find it waiting for you. ■

Book Review



IN THE BEGINNING WAS LOVE: Contemplative Words of Robert Lax

ROBERT LAX. S.T. GEORGIU, EDITOR. TEMPLEGATE (WWW.TEMPLEGATE.COM), 2015.
PP. 136. \$15.95 PAPER

Reviewed by **Richard Whittaker**

THIS BOOK CAME INTO MY HANDS UNEXPECTEDLY. Perhaps I'd consider reviewing it. Then I noticed the name on the cover: Robert Lax. Oh, my. That took me back. I'd run across his name decades earlier, but hadn't taken the time to acquaint myself with his work. There was a connection with Thomas Merton, wasn't there? And lingering in memory was my impression of Lax as a singular figure.

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TOM KENYON

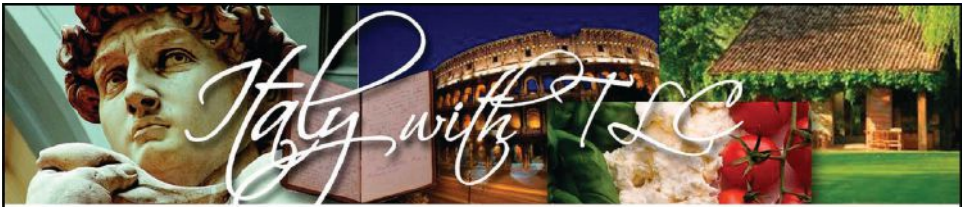
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Tom's presentation of the Siddhis is an amalgam of the Siddhas tradition out of India and out of Tibet, joined with perspectives from modern neuropsychology. To our knowledge, this is the only presentation that joins these three frames of reference together. Though Tom has taught the Siddhis for years, this is the only time he has taught it imparted from Ganesha, through his voice. The ultimate goal of the Siddhis Meditation is the attainment of liberation.

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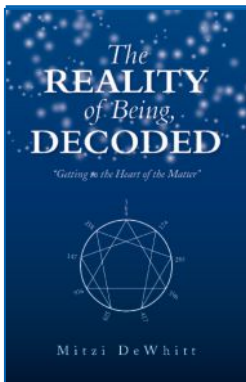
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In the book's foreword, Jonathan Montaldo writes of Lax that "he subdued fame. [I]f anyone else read his work it was purely through grace, and he left it at that." This was no small thing because as a young man, Lax wrote for *TIME* magazine, was an editor for the *NEW YORKER*, and founded the peace magazine *PAX*. In other words, he was well positioned to make a name for himself. But as the compiler and editor of this anthology, S.T. Georgiou, writes, "Lax's attitude, even in terms of writing, was purified of notions of reputation, success; rather it was steeped in disinterestedness, in holiness, charity..." Georgiou adds that Lax advised his friend, Merton, not to aim at being a good Catholic, but at

becoming a saint. And lest this sound too wild, he adds that Paul the Apostle wrote in the *EPISTLES* that all men are called to be saints.

So now the time had come, apparently, for me to meet this mysterious figure—with Georgiou, who had known Lax, as intermediary. He met Lax in 1993 on Patmos—serendipitously, as he writes. Then, after meeting the poet/sage, he, along with other ardent searchers, intermittently returned to the isle to meet with him until his death in 2000.

Turning my attention to this small volume, my intuition that a rare document had come into my hands was quickly confirmed. Not everyone might feel this way. One could come to the



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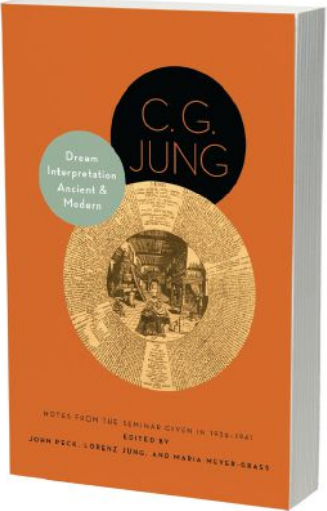
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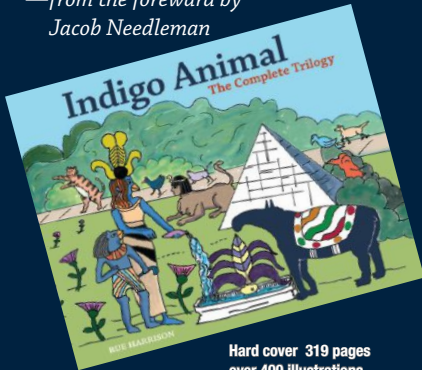
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work of Robert Lax too soon and miss its depth. But eventually one could welcome with gratitude, even with joy, his discernment that stripped away all embellishment. The simplicity of his writing is the reduction that makes clear what one has glimpsed and lost sight of over and over again.

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bread*

*is
bread*

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wine*

*is
wine*



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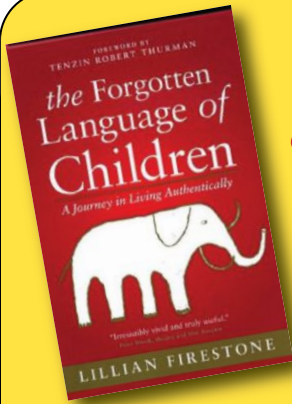
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Or here is the complete piece without its formatting:

This bread is bread. This wine is wine. This bread is bread. This wine is wine. These hands are hands. These hands are hands. This bread is bread. This wine is wine.

As Georgiou writes, the inner life of Robert Lax is the primary theme of this anthology. And he quotes Merton: "Lax was much wiser than I, had clearer vision ... he had seen what was the one important thing."

*For the man one talks to
 (when one talks to the inner self)
 is not at all the man the world knows.
 It can almost be said
 he is not the man
 the man himself knows.*

Reading Lax's work, I found myself thinking about his contemporary, the artist Agnes Martin. She worked "with her back to the world," as she wrote. I see them as much alike. Both found something that's deeply absent in today's culture. What Martin found

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after many years of searching, and which provided direction, she called *humility*. She also said “all art is about beauty.” In essence, humility permits entrance for the luminous, which is one way of describing the work and life of Robert Lax.

As noted in the book’s foreword, “These poems and meditations collected by a foremost student of Lax’s literary work come just at the right time. We live in a confusion of words, pronouncements and points of view; nothing centrally meaningful seems to hold.”

Where, one might ask, can we turn for wisdom? It’s a question Lax ponders.

*what is the value of wisdom? many values,
but
perhaps the most obvious, the most*

*nearly tangible:
the value of survival.*

This echoes what I heard a Tibetan Buddhist, Lobsang Rappagay, a professional psychologist from Los Angeles, say at a conference of spiritual leaders in the 1980s. He spoke of *aesthetic thought*. It wasn’t clear to me what he meant by that, exactly. That kind of thought, he said, was difficult. In the West we were too exhausted to be able to practice it. He went on to say that when it reached a certain level, the numinous could be brought down into circulation in a culture. Without that, he said, a culture could not survive. ■

*Richard Whittaker is the West Coast editor of **Parabola** and the founding editor of works & conversations.*

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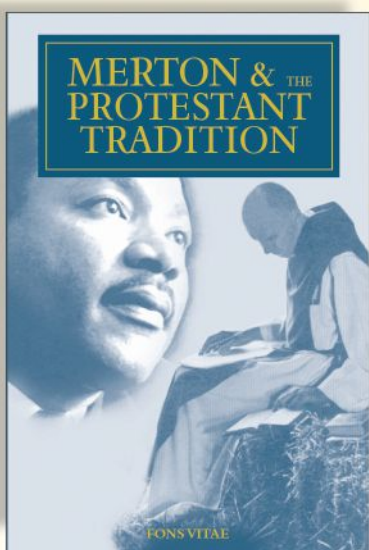
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“I will be a better Catholic, not if I can *refute* every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further . . . If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it.”

— Dr. Paul M. Pearson, Director and Archivist, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University

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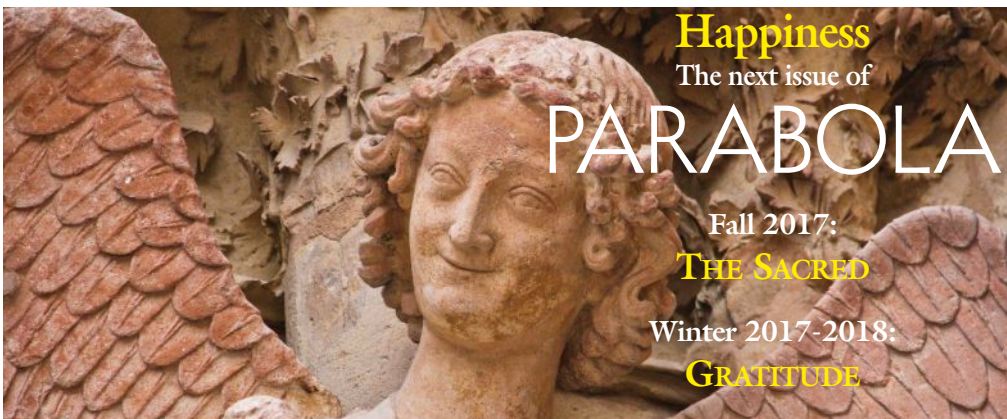
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DIAN DUCHIN REED has been a student of the Dao De Jing and practitioner of *taiji quan* for more than three

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JAMES HUGHES REHO is an Episcopal priest, a yoga instructor, and a Kirtan leader who has been initiated into several spiritual lineages, both East and West. He now serves as Senior Pastor of Lamb of God Lutheran Episcopal Church in Ft. Myers, Florida.

NEIL RUSCH is an independent publisher, editor, and author. His most recent work is *SONQUA: SOUTHERN SAN HISTORY AND ART AFTER CONTACT*, by Pieter Jolly.

TCHESLAW TCHEKHOVITCH (1900-1958) was a longtime student of G.I. Gurdjieff.

ALAN WATTS (1915–1973) was a popular interpreter of Eastern philosophy in the West. He spoke to millions through his recordings, radio broadcasts, and books, including such classics as *THE WISDOM OF INSECURITY*, *BECOME WHAT YOU ARE*, and his new book, adapted from recordings of live presentations by his son and archivist, Mark Watts, *OUT OF YOUR MIND: TRICKSTERS, INDEPENDENCE, AND THE COSMIC GAME OF HIDE AND SEEK* (Sounds True, March 2017).

RICHARD WHITTAKER is the founding editor of *works & conversations* and West Coast editor of *Parabola*.

OSCAR WILDE (1854-1900) was the Irish author of such classics as *THE PORTRAIT OF DORIAN GRAY*, *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*, and *DE PROFUNDIS*.

ENDPOINT



An Oasis in the Badlands, Edward S. Curtis, 1905

WE SHOULD UNDERSTAND WELL that all things are the work of the Great Spirit. We should know that He is within all things: the trees, the grasses, the rivers, the mountains, and all the four-legged animals, and all the winged peoples; and even more important, we should understand that He is also above all these things and peoples.
—Black Elk¹

¹ *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*, recorded and edited by Joseph Epes Brown (Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1953)

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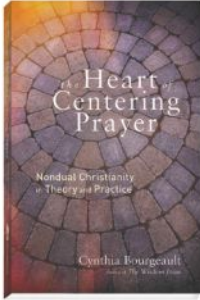
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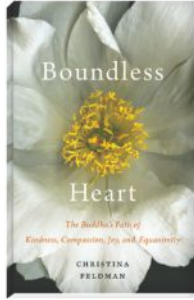
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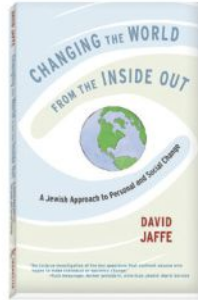
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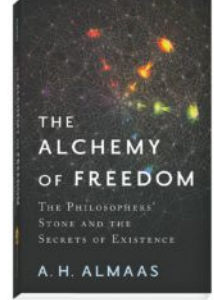
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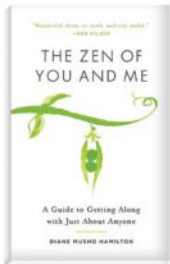
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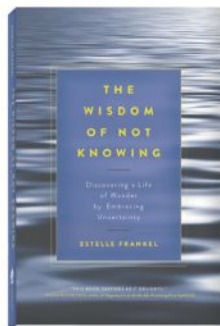
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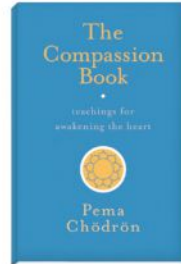
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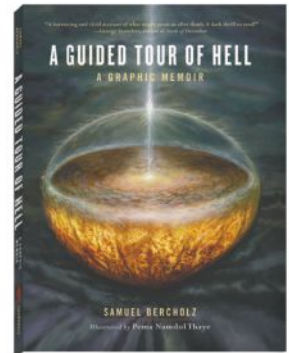
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