

# THE WAY OF THE SEER

*~ On Becoming Immortal ~*

R D Walsh

FOR MY TEACHERS AND STUDENTS  
WITH GRATITUDE FOREVER

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# PREFACE

## Forever

The word “forever” is a big word for its compact, seven-letter size. Too big to grasp all at once. Too obscure, too subtle for its deepest possibility to show itself on demand. Perhaps it would be more effective to invite Forever in for tea and see what it might have to say for itself. But even then—language being what it is, and isn’t—all you will get is the bare bones of its subtle meaning. No blood or guts, no living tissue...all form without content, and thus not the fullness of the mystery of Forever itself, as it is in itself. That will require something more.

The everyday word “forever” that you and I know and think we have grasped in our casual assertions or complex mathematical expressions, such an utterance will always be a mere carapace of the true meaningfulness percolating at the heart of Forever. This simple term that everyone employs thoughtlessly as a tool to designate a great unknown is nothing itself but a remnant or sign, a faint trace of what will have always already passed beyond the possibility of being grasped conceptually.

Yet even those bare bones of Forever were shocking and disruptive to my nine-year-old consciousness when I first awakened to the sound of them. It happened when I was in the third grade at Sacred Heart elementary school. I recall experiencing a mind-blowing kind of feeling as I listened to my third-grade teacher, Sister Claire de Chantel, describe the glories and horrors of the afterworld which, she assured us, would go on *forever*.

“After you die,” Sister Claire was saying, “depending on how you act during your lifetime here on earth, mind you, your soul will go either to heaven or to hell. Now, heaven is eternal bliss with a loving God and hell is estrangement from God and eternal punishment of the worst possible kind. And that will go on forever.”

I was unexpectedly dumbstruck by Sister Claire’s words. *Eternal* punishment? *Forever*? What in the world? How could that be? What could it be like?

Sister Claire seemed to respond to my unspoken incredulity. “What kind of punishment?” she asked rhetorically. “Well, let me tell you, children. The souls of evildoers in this world will be forever engulfed in never-ending flames.”

Still in a bit of shock, I couldn’t wrap my head around the idea that those otherworldly outcomes—pure bliss or horrific pain—would go on *forever*. I vaguely knew, or thought I knew, that forever was a very, very long time but now, thinking about it in

terms of *endless* pleasure or pain, I felt unmoored from any understanding.

I tried to square up the unfathomable idea of Forever within the framework of my childish concept of reality. I could feel my mind straining to grasp the fullness of the idea as I so easily grasped other ideas, like the idea of a cold Root Beer soda on a hot afternoon. No problem “getting” that idea ‘in the flesh’. But I couldn’t “get” the idea of Forever in the same way. A mere dictionary definition of the word was insufficient. Anyone could get that. What I wanted to know involved the full experienceable reality of this strange term, what Forever was actually *like*.

Problem is, Forever is a category unto itself. Everything else I experience has finality built into it. Third grade, summertime, birthday parties, Root Beer sodas, everything that has a beginning will come to an end. Finitude is all around us and thus familiar to us. On the other hand, I have no positive experience of Forever. To say that Forever equals *not* ending or is the *in*-finite doesn’t get the job done. It doesn’t say anything positively about what Forever actually *is* in itself, in its experienceable reality, if it can be said to have one. But surely Forever must be experienceable, I reasoned, or what sense could forever *bliss* or forever *pain* possibly make if they weren’t experienceable? Yet, I found it to be impossible to experience what forever is like.

Despite the fact that the idea of Forever seemed like it could not be grasped in its full positive presence, I would often find

myself wondering about this slippery term, trying to 'get' it while being curiously intrigued by the fact that I could not 'get' it, that it always got away, like Road Runner perpetually escaping the clutches of Wile E. Coyote.

I recall walking home from school one warm and sunny afternoon while mulling over the idea of Forever, 'wrestling' around with it like I did with my brothers sometimes, wanting to make it say "Uncle!" and show itself to me so I could actually see and experience what Forever was *really* all about.

The reticence of Forever to emerge from its abstractness and transform into a real experience seems to merge with how we approach the term, our presuppositions. Imagine, for example, that Forever is not merely an unending repetition of good or bad moments of time heading off into some supposed limitless future where the temporal moments repeat or re-create themselves endlessly, as if eternally heading somewhere but never getting there. No, if Forever is heading anywhere, I thought, it must be heading towards where it has always already been and always will be since Forever necessarily entails the end of time, a beyond time, and not its infinite regression or progression. It seems at first glance as if there must be some temporality to Forever, but that does not make sense. It would not be Forever if it had not *always been forever* and would not *always* be forever, in-finite in both directions, all the way up and all the way down at once. That is what makes it impossible to grasp Forever reflectively. Forever, as

an experienceable reality, is necessarily outside of time and space and any categories of understanding, where grasping, comprehending, calculative, propositional thinking cannot effectively go.

The endless repetition view of Forever from this point on is an oversimplified, conventional way of looking at it. That kind of reductive, mechanistic, mathematical approach to Forever will never be able to make the wholehearted leap past cognitive reasoning that is necessary to reach the essence of Forever in its pure and sublime 'forevering'. Forever, in itself, must be, paradoxically, all possible temporal moments happening all at once and always with nothing wanting or left out of its all-encompassing, expansive relentlessness, forever essentially beyond time and being. The all-inclusiveness of Forever, neither coming nor going, having no past and no future in itself, already outside of time and being, is always on the way to becoming what it is...forever. Forever will never arrive at the destination if appears to aim for, the complete fullness of its own meaning and yet *that* is precisely the fullness of its meaning. It is always 'there' already, a 'there' which defies meaningful expression in logical, propositional language.

Forever necessarily has no origin and no aim. It isn't intending to get anywhere, beyond intentionality altogether. There would be no such thing as old or young in the foreverness of Forever. The very idea of "end" or "beginning" would be

meaningless. It would simply be forever and always all of those possibilities, and already any other categories that would seek to reduce it, contain it, or pin it down to being this or that kind of thing—something to which Forever would never willingly succumb.

Something about walking and thinking gave life to my thoughts. I felt like I was pulled up into a contemplative state as I ambled along the familiar, tree-lined street, the smell of summer already in the air. In a haze of wonderment, I found myself repeating phrases to myself like “It just goes on and on and on, never ending...” or “Forever and ever and ever and ever...” as if the sheer repetition of the words might function as an incantation that would magically produce in me the clear experience of Forever, a full and satisfying understanding of it ‘in the flesh’. But no. When I tried to produce a felt mental representation of what Forever is like, I experienced only a dull sense of impossibility, as if what I wanted to know was forbidden fruit that would not be handed over willy-nilly to impetuous schoolboys.

It isn’t the formal idea of Forever that is the problem. For me, it was my frustration at failing to be able to grasp the full, tangible scope of it. But, at the same time, that mental frustration was also what intrigued me—the failure at the limit of what I could think and experience representationally, the physical sensation of trying to think the idea experientially while the stubborn term continually broke free of my attempts to do so, bolting off with wild horses over

the hill toward, I suspected, a participatory *mystique* with the unknowable and the unconditioned sense of Forever, the experience of which would require a different attitude and a different response. It would have to be more of a spiritual event than a comprehension. And that is exactly how I unexpectedly met up with the full meaningfulness of Forever a few years later in an experience that would forever change the course of my life. Here is how it happened.

\* \* \* \*

I am mowing the front lawn early on a summer's day in August. I am now fourteen-years-old and in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Pushing the power mower through the cool, morning air is a pleasant task. The whirring sound of the engine creates a kind of bubble in which I float off pleasantly from the everyday world. The repetitive walking back and forth is meditative and reflection-inducing. It is an exercise that always brings on spontaneous reflection and sometimes scandalous fantasizing, soliloquizing, or unselfconscious singing right out loud, la-di-dah! This particular morning, however, I find myself pondering the mystery of Forever again.

Almost absent-mindedly, I am repeating the word "forever" over and over as I mow, trying to feel my way into it, trying to 'get' it. I would often fall into reveries of wondering about life and death and what might happen to me after I die. The whole question of immortality would appear in my mind like an old friend. It was one

of my favorite things to wonder about. Catholic doctrine teaches that there is a personal immortality, so there was always plenty of “forever talk” at my school and church. It seemed like every prayer we ever recited ended with the words “forever and ever.” But on this fair morning something quite extraordinary happened in the midst of my wondering.

Suddenly, as I am mowing and meditating, I am overcome by a powerful, warm flood of energy surging up from within me. It stops me frozen in my tracks. My back and shoulders stiffen slightly. It is like I am in shock, but it is pleasant. The mower engine is whirring far in the background. Vibrations from the mower handles are skittering up my forearms into a warm, sensual fullness gathering in my chest, swelling pleasantly, like something of unspeakable beauty blossoming in me, a wonderful insistence that I know immediately to be an experience of Forever.

A torrent of tears comes pouring from my eyes the moment I am overcome by the powerful, inexplicable beauty of what is happening. Tears are just streaming down my cheeks, dripping onto my shirt. But it is not like I am actually crying. No sobs or sniffles, just copious tears pouring down. The tears feel exquisitely beautiful and pleasant, like being saturated by a truth of sublime beauty that cannot be spoken in words because it is just too astounding, too incomprehensible, too beautiful. Tears overflowing from a flood of rapturous, passionate joy that somehow feels like the most natural and normal thing.

Of course, I was not thinking *any* of that at the time. I was not thinking anything at all. I was swamped by the moment, beyond myself. It was not like I was *having* an experience. It was more like I *was* the experience itself. It felt as if I were suddenly inundated with the pure energy of what Forever is actually like in its real presence. All I can say is that the experience was wonderful beyond words! Once you actually experience a glimpse of Forever as a living, breathing reality, you will see what I mean. Any doubts you might have about its real existence will evaporate.

The experience lasted maybe a minute and a half, tears streaming down my face the entire time. Nothing like that had ever happened to me, yet it didn't feel weird at all. I distantly knew how crazy it might seem, the tears and the warm fullness of ecstatic joy, being unable to move and all, but I didn't care. It was intoxicating to simply succumb to the rapturous grip of Forever, the exquisite beauty of it all at once. Anyway, I didn't feel that I had a choice. I didn't get it. It came and got me. And it felt altogether natural and normal, like a jacket or a glove that fits just right the first time you put it on. I was ready.

I never shared the experience I had that morning with anyone. I thought they would think I was crazy. But everything else in my life ever since has always been measured by the spiritual barometer of that magical experience of Forever. The sublime, glorious taste of it remains with me, a kind of sweet aftertaste in my memory. It is what has led inexorably to the composition of

this text, *Way of the Seer*. That same ecstatic energy inhabits these pages, a shy but sure knowledge that we are all “Forever beings” whether we know it or not. The real possibility of becoming immortal is there for anyone who wants it. That is what I learned ‘in the flesh’ that morning and that is what you will discover in the pages that follow. All it will take on your part to start along the path to Forever is an openness to the wonder of Wonder.

# INTRODUCTION

## Wonder

In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle suggests that wonder is the path to enlightenment, happiness, and, perhaps, immortality. Wonder is the entranceway, he claims, into a life-path that can start from anywhere but always begins with a sense of being awe-struck or overwhelmed with amazement, as if at the revelation of a longstanding mystery, seeing it for the first time. Along with the astonishment that is wonder there will come a change of heart, a new attitude, a *metanoia* of seeing-into, of bringing the new into being. That transformative awe-fulness of wonder is the narrow opening into the way of the Seer. It is the gateway. Aristotle was right to focus on wonder as the true beginning of the philosophical way of life. There is no other way to begin.

Wonder is not a thing that exists 'out there' objectively, of course. It is a response that happens within the seeker of wisdom, within the heart of the one longing for enlightenment. Wonder is to respond amazingly, questioningly, openly, receptively,

vulnerably, and pretty much helplessly, before you know it, to the gift of an excitation or disturbance or trauma that befalls you like an unexpected invitation. Wonder is a response to an unsuspected shake-up of your being, however large or slight such a trauma of awakening might be. To find yourself captivated by wonder is to be awakened by a rip or ripple in the seamless coincidence of your knowing, to be torn from the supposed objective certainty of it, a certitude that is thoughtlessly presumed in its apparently simple and straightforward givenness.

Wonder is a mind-expanding, conventionality dampening, drug-like disturbance that will shake you out of your value complacency and awaken you from your dogmatic, conventionalist slumber, thus allowing you to think in a pre-delineated, intuitive, insightful, and poetic fashion what is nevertheless not yet possible to be thought. Wonder puts you in touch with a beyond-the-possible, with the possibility of the impossible, having the form of an event that is just on the brink of coming into being but not quite there yet, a persistent, liminal, and insistent welcoming that is forever approaching the moment of articulate definition, of being seen, without ever arriving at its terminus.

That responding, or response-ability, that is wondering, requires an attitude of openness to the unknown, to mystery and the otherwise-than-being on the part of the aspirant. It requires the opening up of a little chink in the monolithic pretensions of all egoistic claims to know ... a willingness to entertain doubt,

uncertainty, to pose unanswerable questions, consider possibilities and impossibilities, throwing yourself into the risk of seeing. In the final analysis, it will not be you that happens to wonder. Rather, wonder will happen to you before you know it, as if out of nothing!

Wonder comes calling all the time. But it is up to you whether you are available and willing to respond when it does. A certain fearlessness bordering on the reckless is necessary, a willingness to put your life on the line, to be beset with the impatient readiness of an expectant and hopeful lover. Fortune favors the bold.

Engaging with wonder, opening yourself to it, allowing the otherwise of wonder to engage you ... that is the beginning of the philosophical way of life and the path to immortality that you will find revealed in these few pages, the first practice. This giving of yourself over to wonder in its fullest engagement is the renunciation and letting go, the wrenching free from all conventional attitudes, attachments, prejudices, biases, fears, and pre-judgments. From there, you must then take up the reflective, phenomenologically reduced philosophical-poetic attitude that you will find showing itself in and through the reflections, incantations, and visions that constitute this work. That is the "attitude" or the *way* of the seer.

Many close the door preemptively on the disruption or overflow of light that is wondering, choosing instead to follow the dim, delusional shadows of the well-worn way of the conventional attitude, like Platonic 'sleepwalkers' blindly moving through life,

prisoners in a cave mistaking silhouettes on the wall for reality, like sheep going with the current of the herd, trying to measure up to an impossible standard, but never able to do so. When this conventional way of everybody and nobody fails to lead to true and lasting happiness, then, through an awakening of wonder, a trauma of wonder, those who have lost their way in the conventional maze may be opened anew to the way of the seer, the way of enlightenment and the path to immortality.

“Create for yourself an immortal body,” Aristotle advises toward the end of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Do it now, today, while there is still time, remembering always that time is fleeting and death is always near, *memento mori (et vivere!)*, as the Stoics were fond of saying. Open yourself with humility to wonder, for wonder is the threshold of the everlasting, an invitation to go beyond your mortal being and become immortal. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, “That which is corruptible must clothe itself with incorruptibility, and that which is mortal must clothe itself with immortality.”

Every negative energy or experience that you have includes within it a way to overcome it, to learn, develop, benefit, and grow from it, and thus to alchemically transform *every* ounce of negative energy into something positive, good, enlightening, uplifting and developmental. Not an easy trick to learn and maintain in practice, perhaps, but it is possible to achieve the transformative goal of this in-seeing, all the way to immortality itself, through a relentless

apprenticeship to the way of the seer driven by a natural longing for the beyond that is born of wonder...

Wondering beyond the wonderful leads you to question but be cautiously skeptical about what you accept as true and what you claim to know with certainty. A little skepticism will help to guide you along the path of wondering. It will keep you from falling into prejudice and error, especially in your ideas, beliefs, values and the practical everyday judgments that you make based on those beliefs and values and which inform your attitude. The ancient philosophers understood a healthy but restrained skepticism to be the first step down the road toward tranquility of spirit and true happiness here and now and forever.

A little skepticism, a little change of attitude, a little willingness to let go and take a life-risk in response to the call of wonder coming into your life, these are the prerequisites needed to begin the journey that follows along the way of the seer. Are you ready?

R D Walsh  
Bitterroot Valley  
Hamilton, Montana  
October 2023

# Wild Iris

Keep your carnivals  
Cavorting flesh-shod  
Stampeding Cadillacs  
Whirligigs gears  
Clocks locks lovers  
Lamenting their losses  
On handsome calculators  
Gibberish junk-heaps  
Antiseptic claptrap  
Cocktail-party convolutions  
Garishly glittering gobbledygook...  
Keep it all  
For a better man than me!  
But for myself only this:  
Patience  
And  
A  
Slender  
Swaying  
Stalk  
Of  
Wild iris  
To contemplate on  
A summer's afternoon.

*I.*

*OPENING THE WAY*

# 1.

## Radical Epistemology: 'Truth' and False Beliefs

The philosopher David Hume argued correctly that there are no ultimate truths about anything that are known with absolute certitude—including the truthfulness of that assertion itself, the Pyrrhonians remind us. Yet thinking must begin somewhere. If necessary, it must take off spontaneously without an Archimedean point of gifted certitude showing it the way.

Rather than beginning with a rationally determined absolute principle or theory of some kind, and then imposing that structure preemptively on matters to be understood and made sense of, our beginning along the way of the seer will initiate more naturally and organically from below, uncertainly and unpredictably, following the mysterious paradigm of a burgeoning seed emerging from the given chaos of its ground, beyond understanding but still ever curious and implacable in its course. Certitude will or will not come later.

An ultimate truth would entail—in the strongest sense—absolute, necessary, universal, verifiable, and falsifiable certitude

about something such as the origin, nature, or purpose of reality, the origin or nature of life, reason, consciousness, value, the existence of God, the direct knowledge of other minds, etc. The history and persistence of skepticism about such matters demonstrates repeatedly and convincingly the impossibility of an absolute, objective notion of truth. The way of the seer does not follow that well-worn way trod by everybody and nobody.

The proposition that there is no ultimate truth, as intended here, is not so much a self-refuting position-taking as it is a challenge to all dogmatic pretensions toward absolutes, an intentional disruption, a kind of skeptical deconstruction. The critique of the pretensions of objective truth in its grasping after absolute knowledge is not merely a logical, rational critique. To be understood most essentially, it is a critical attitude that must be lived-through as *truth-speaking*, lived through every day in all our existential interactions without us ever being able to fully grasp or comprehend such truth-speaking objectively.

Truth does not stand alone as a detached and impersonal entity or object existing independent of change in some 'objective world' apart from me and my subjectivity and capable of being grasped by a knowing but unaffected mind. Rather, truth occurs in the process of one person speaking to another, or it doesn't happen at all. This narrative, dialectical necessity of truth-speaking reveals the social nature of truth as a lived reality. Truth-speaking is something quite different than the establishment of objectively

valid ultimate truths. Truth-speaking is how the world actually works.

Many people do not want to hear about or even consider the possibility of the impossibility of knowing ultimate truths. Instead, they prefer passionate belief in stories parading as absolute truths which calm and tranquilize their existential anxieties, send them comfortably and complacently sleepwalking through a cloud of fuzzy beliefs mistaken for truth or passed off thoughtlessly as the ultimate and absolute truth: religious stories; scientific stories; cultural stories; economic stories; stories of power, fame, glory and empire; stories that make conventional sense out of existential non-sense; stories full of concocted or constructed meaning masquerading as absolutes peddling certitude; stories meant to calm your nerves and put you to sleep, encourage dutiful compliance and keep you from questioning and wondering.

Non-sense prevails despite persistent attempts to make sense out of it. The collective, conventional fables, stories, and myths that structure our sense of ultimate truths keep us from having to look directly into the unfathomable and perhaps terrifying 'truth' that there are no ultimate, absolute truths that we know of, not even that assertion itself. Yet this is not necessarily a bad thing. It is not the end.

The critique of objective truth makes genuine beginning possible in the form of interpersonal truth-speaking. Narrative, truth-speaking subjectivity that is always and necessarily an inter-

subjectivity, as we will see, is not a dead end or self-enclosed vicious circle with no bearing on the real. It is rather the essential condition for the possibility of forever beginning anew, a kind of repetitive compulsion toward the infinite renewal percolating at the heart of immortality.

Such is the way of the seer.

## 2. Stories and the False Comfort of Delusion

What do we think we know but do not know and cannot possibly know (at least for now)? Let us consider a few things.

We do not know where we are. We do not know who we are. We do not know the true nature of reality, not even in and by these words that give it a mere representational being, that is, words which misrepresent it no matter how hard they try to bracket out bias, prejudice, and delusion as they represent the real. Words always come late upon the scene of the event which is always already gone before it is represented. We cannot grasp reality as it is in itself, objectively. We can only *live* the real. Thus, we must go beyond the mere abstract, depersonalized representation of words into the immediacy of saying, which has a poetic character. To do that we must see what we cannot see.

*1. We do not know where we are.* I say that I am here, in my office, in New York or Chicago or Paris, on the planet earth, among other planets revolving around our sun in a solar system, in the Milky Way galaxy hurtling through an expansive, perhaps infinite void, expanding from nowhere into nowhere, a galaxy among

billions of other galaxies in the visible cosmos, all of which supposedly were produced by a Big Bang of some kind, causing the entirety of reality to be burst from some super-dense quantum of matter which is now expanding in every direction into infinity and which may or may not collapse back upon itself ... something like that, a rough outline of the scientific story we tell ourselves about the origin, nature, and establishment of our being-in-a-place, being somewhere, being here and now. But the truth is that we do not know the coordinates for where we are, for there are none. Here and now do not exist in nature before we see it as nature and call it nature and say it is here and now. We know of no here and now outside of what we say is here and now.

The ideas of being and time are among our grandest cultural fictions, making that fiction possible. They are building blocks used to construct masterly delusions in the shape of what we call the real, objects which are then ready-made to be investigated by science in its mode of figuring-out by dissecting and cataloguing. Or, if you are not the scientific type, you may subscribe to there being an omnipotent creator God who brought to be and holds in being everything that is, a God who keeps it all 'being-there'. There are many different renditions of creation myths or stories, which have evolutionary value, as naïve realism has evolutionary value. The very possibility of any cooperative social order among vast numbers of strangers requires a mythical or fictional storyline

explanation of its own origin, for the sake of group cohesion and the creation of collective possibilities.

But even if I accepted without question any or all of these positional determinations as meaningful explanations of “where I am,” ultimately, we do not know where the cosmos itself is, if there is an outside from where we could comprehend the cosmos, if ‘it’ is, indeed, ‘anywhere’ at all, since we know of nothing outside of it by which we could locate it ‘here’ or ‘there’, *somewhere* or *anywhere*. We say things seemingly but do not comprehend the seeming itself, just as the eye does not simultaneously see and see its own seeing.

There is no absolute knowledge of any ultimate reference point from which to make sense of where we are or might be, no possible ‘view from nowhere’. So, we simply create one. We call it God or Allah or Coyote or the Demiurge or the Big Bang or apeiron, Logos, Archē, or whatever, and then, feeling much less anxious now that we are resting on the cushion of this made-up story of creation (or evolution or whatever) in relation to the world, we fall back into a comfortable dogmatic slumber feeling as though we do know where we are, after all: God (or Nature, or Zeus, or Adaptation and Natural Selection, or Aliens) is in his/her/its/their heaven and all is now right with the world—the important outcome. And, so, amen and goodnight. Sleep well.

It should be so easy. But the simple critique-of-truth is that we do not know where we are since, again, there is no absolute

spatial reference point for establishing this “where” as being somewhere or anywhere. Such a point, where-I-am, will never be found, no matter how powerful the telescope. We mistakenly take our projected representation of ourselves as such a reference point. In fact (if there are such things as “facts”), we are ‘lost’ or ‘abandoned’ or ‘thrown’ into the world from nowhere at every instant, as existentialism teaches. We may find this hard to deal with, but the fact of the matter is we do not have a clue as to where we might be, in any absolute sense. Nor can we ever hope to, though hope springs eternal.

Where ‘we are’ is worse than being lost since “being lost” at least presumes that there is some place where—if we could get there—we would be found. But there is no such place that we know of. Thus, there is no way for earth and earthlings to ever be “found” since not to be ‘here and now’ is to be nowhere. This produces, in the very fiber of whatever our sentient being turns out to be, a deep terror and frantic, near-hysterical insecurity beyond words and beyond reckoning, deep in our psyche, an intolerable terror that threatens us with depletion into anonymity and oblivion, into an abysmal loss of being, at every instant.

Yet stories hold the terror at bay. Thus, we rarely experience the terror directly, due to the effectiveness of our stories to create an unquestioning acceptance that the stories are simply *de facto* true—although sometimes the existential terror that is put to sleep by the comforting stories does shine through in mental health

breakdowns, in rage episodes, drug-induced transports, mass shootings, mass hysteria, war, or other trauma to our psychological armor that cannot effectively process the reality of being worse than lost with no possibility of ever being found, at least not in this life.

2. *We do not know who we are.* There are many theories about what is called “human nature,” but there are no certain truths anywhere to be found. We are a perpetual mystery to ourselves, even for those who have committed themselves to a life of self-development, or to mystical-philosophical contemplation and self-knowledge, or to the gods of science. As Nietzsche pointed out, we knowers do not know ourselves.

We do not know what this being we call ‘life’ is all about, how it is that it is. It is an act of hubris to want to know the “meaning of life” when we do not even know what life itself *is* or why it should be or how it came to be. There is not any clearly defined, ultimate purpose or meaning to or about what we call “life” that is universally accepted as true or given, despite all the illusory, conventional claims to the contrary. Rather, the meaningfulness that life may or may not have, is given in the matrix of constructed stories that structure any consciousness and are in turn structured by that consciousness, the way “The American Dream” or “The Myth of Romantic Love” are socially constructed stories directing us to versions of the good life. Meaning is construed as a network of such cultural myths. But the fact of the matter is this: life does

not come with a guidebook or explicit directions or explanations about anything, despite all the fictional stories we make up to the contrary. We made up the idea of natural law, of Nature itself, and all the rest, but we have been unable to create a master or unifying mythology, a theory of everything, although we are perhaps approaching a simulation of that in the technological self-pursuit of artificial super-intelligence, synthetic biology, virtual reality, etc., like measuring devices by which we can finally assay ourselves and see who we are, however incompletely.

3. *We do not know the nature of 'reality'.* For example, we do not know if there is any absolute material reality that exists and persists in being, independently of our perception of it, despite every adamant empirical protestation to the contrary. Yet, along with Kant, we pretend and cling desperately to the belief that there must be *something* 'out there', an unknown, noumenal "X" that really does exist as the real and true foundation of our knowing, just as we continue to speak of the sun rising and setting, even though we know better, just as we continue to assert that we are entirely free and autonomous moral agents without a rational basis for such a belief. I am certain of the room as it appears to me but I have no idea of the room as it is in-itself which supposedly supports that appearance.

All the information, all the algorithmically analyzed data in the world, and all the technological know-how in the world, will never amount to a shred of ultimate truth about anything. That is

not necessarily a bad thing. We are, perhaps, blessed that there is such mystery at the heart of being, with always more to come, which, by happenchance, is the very structure of immortality, always more to come....

Thus, to doubt where others falsely believe they know is the perennial gift of philosophy, the Socratic gadfly at work. That questioning skepsis, that living in the aporia of unknowing, that renunciation which is a fundamental challenging of the conventional belief system is, rather, the first step down the path to enlightenment and wisdom, a path we enter upon by letting go of it.

As Socrates put it, you are wise when you know that you know nothing.

### 3.

## Life Stories and The Structuring of Consciousness

Conventional people do not want to see what-is-happening, a term that is intentionally hyphenated to emphasize the unity among the seer, the seeing, and the seen of this process of seeing-what-is-happening. As Nietzsche put it: All common, conventional people lie. They say that things are the way that they want you to see them. That is not meant as an accusation by Nietzsche, but a revelation born of observation. Perceptually deluded, the conventional masses of people do not know that they are lying. Plato's sleepwalkers do not know they are sleepwalking.

Misstatements and untrue statements are the backbone of the conventional. Conventional value stories are like pretty skins covering a repugnant horror with a comfortable, pleasing veneer. *Don't worry, sweetie. Everything happens for a reason.* You wish. While it is stories that allow what-is-happening to appear obliquely, they simultaneously cover up what-is-happening like an enchanting cataract. Stories are a hiding place for those who would

promote their own self-interest and avoid seeing clearly that they are doing so. The false bliss of ignorance. All life stories seem to have this common feature: they are both a revelation and a cover-up, like all masks, bipolar.

The stories people tell about themselves (who they are, what is happening or has happened in their lives, what is important to them, where they think they are going, etc.), and the stories they believe-in (e.g., creation myths, freedom, hell, 'channeling', mysticism, science, religion, whatever) are often a way of purposefully misconstruing a truth for self-serving reasons. Religious storytelling, for instance, may be a way of metaphysically distorting genuine truth-speaking in order to control people, to get them to give money to support the church and support the priestly caste who don't work and who don't produce anything concrete and tangible, to amplify upon Nietzsche's insight. The same for psycho-therapeutic storytelling. Freudian psychoanalysis, for example, or empirical psychology. Some whoppers there! Psychologists devising stories to turn people into measurable scientific objects inside a box of jargon-mythology to be manipulated by skillful controllers. Then, for the 'oh-so-scientific' revelation to themselves of those fables by an impartial 'analyst', they will pay handsomely.

I knew a man who often spoke of how his deceased wife (who had committed suicide) was "bipolar," a disorder which he called her "disease," as if these words located and articulated the origin

and cause of her suicide, its full meaning and sense, as if they accounted for it entirely and provided some kind of closure for the man. What he wasn't telling himself was that these terms were part of a heavily value-laden story that behind his back and without being seen got him off the hook of his guilt and self-recrimination for somehow contributing to the process of her demise, the way all interacting in relationships is the production of all the players involved. The man felt better for being able to put an objective name on something "other" that now had its own teleology and its own life, so that no one would be responsible, least of all him. The bedrock of the conventional is the denial of responsibility, often presented as 'blaming'.

Psychological diagnosis is just another kind of storytelling. To label someone "schizophrenic" or "borderline," as if these fanciful categories were actually existent, objective things or categories in the world instead of the poetic delineations of cultural autocrats, is for a superior power to assign to a much lesser power (the person who is so labeled) a certain story line, a certain plot, an identity, like a fate, like something happening on its own that no one is responsible for, haunting your life. Civic story telling is the same. The story of "good citizenship" and "nationalism" and "patriotism" is a complex and subtle way of a more powerful group getting a much less powerful group to sacrifice their money and their lives for the sake of the private ends of politicians and power mongers who sit back and collect. And then there are all those

stories that the powerbrokers of big business perpetuate so that hapless consumers, those of much lesser power, will work hard and buy their products, support their empires, and survive on the stories they provide with their products, not unlike the way circus and gladiatorial contests were necessary in ancient Rome to control the Roman populace. It is no different for us. Big religion, big government, and big business are the biggest storytellers of our day! Their myths narcotize the masses into a conventional mindset. An opposing force is the Way of the Seer.

Like all masks, life stories both conceal and reveal; they are a double-edged sword, concealing the real and revealing a cultural myth in its place. Without stories, nothing would appear; yet the stories that allow what-is-happening to appear also conceal the deepest mystery of what is revealed, what is beyond saying, Forever receding before our narrative grasp, like a black hole right in the middle of what-is-happening through which it perpetually leaks away from itself, caves in on itself, leaving dark and unspeakable whispers of madness streaming in its wake, murmurings that will be domesticated, packaged, and sold by the tellers of tales to the needy conventional masses.

Stories give, stories take away. Blessed be the naming of stories.

## 4.

# Out of The Abyss: Experience, Consciousness, Storytelling

The appearances that flesh-out everyday intentional consciousness come into being out of a preconscious, mystical responding to what is essentially unknowable via representation and is thus wholly other. What comes to be this or that does so out of an abyss of anonymity (not nothing, but not quite something either) that is more terrifying than any conceivable horror, an intuitive pre-delineation of no-thing-ness which you may glimpse obliquely in certain traumatic experiences of altered consciousness while it nevertheless remains other to the consciousness it produces.

What is first in the order of our experiencing, as a kind of negative background or condition for the possibility of our having an experience in general, is an abyss of lack. Not nothing, yet not something either. A half-heard rustling glimpsed obliquely in certain cognitive and emotive disruptions like vertigo, insomnia, isolation, horror, terror ... the essence of which is this: we have no certain knowledge about who we are, where we are, what "life" is all about, any purpose to life, what is expected of us, what we

should expect, what we are doing here, etc. In short, we are worse than “being lost” could ever be, since the only “being-found” we know to be possible (in connection to which “being lost” could alone make sense) is one that we must produce or construct for ourselves narratively as storytelling—our existential dilemma. We are ‘condemned’ to create our world. So it is easier to just go along with the conventional way of things.

That terrible repressed premonition of experiencing the radical not-knowing at the heart of being, that anxiety of being-worse-than-lost or forsaken and abandoned in the world (since these anthropocentric terms presume someone who does the forsaking and abandoning, as well as someone who is forsaken or abandoned—a luxury of knowing we do not have) takes form at the edges of our awareness as an existential, pre-conscious, and repugnant horror, a horror that my narratively-constructed Self fears dissolution into (and is, in a sense, always being born out of), and from which “I” recoil into the spatiality and temporality of an intentional consciousness opened up by personal, interpersonal, and social/cultural stories and storytelling through the gift of language as dwelling.

All storytelling is inherently interpersonal and social (since it involves linguistic construction and since language is necessarily social)—and perhaps consciousness itself is nothing but a web of stories constructed by us weavers of these diaphanous filaments of sense and non-sense. No individual could come to consciousness

alone since human consciousness is essentially social and interpersonal. Consciousness is a web of some kind or not at all, despite appearances to it being some power of the individual. Individual consciousness is a myth. Whether we like it or not, we are all in this conscious, linguistic reality together, conjoined by mutual necessity for our being, despite ourselves. The solitary self or the self-made individual is an impossible fiction. No hermit ever lives alone.

Storytelling would be the clothing of time and space, making these real in experience as spatiality (space as experienced) and temporality (time as experienced). Storytelling opens up an interpersonal spatial and temporal dimension of my world in which sequences of 'events' unfold playfully, almost haphazardly. Stories never happen in a vacuum. They always happen somewhere, sometime, to someone, and between or among others, with a foreground, background, beginning, middle, and end, cultural confabulations that are the heart of fiction. Time and space happen as the temporality and spatiality of interpersonal storytelling, like the grammar and syntax that makes this possible, and is not something added on later. It is not so much that stories 'happen' within some prefigured, abstract notion of time and space (not even understood as sensible intuitions), but, rather, time and space first appear *in* the temporality and spatiality which storytelling opens up, as if out of nothing, as if by sleight-of-hand.

Creation myths, in their opening-up of a world, would be the very birth of time and space and not the result of an abstract sensible intuition given within an already established time/space continuum. The consciousness of “On the first day...” or “Once upon a time...” ambiguously and with a peculiar circularity operates already in what its articulation establishes. Storytelling, a production of ordinary narrative consciousness, does not know the end of the story from the outset but could not begin without some intuitive pre-delineation or premonition of the end, a rough sketch of the suspected, always unknown, future, since the consciousness established in the telling and the consciousness doing the telling are the same. Consciousness is not the aftermath of some previously existing state-of-affairs or story already given, coming late upon the scene of its own beginning. It is the way in which all storytelling happens. The poets—they myth-makers, the storytellers—create the world.

Kant thought that he saw the necessity for time and space to be *a priori* intuitions, unconditioned conditions for the possibility of experience, because, in Kant’s view of pure reasoning, experience could not happen without the prior delineation of these modalities, along with certain categories and principles of understanding. But such a conception could only happen after the fact, after there already was some experience making this reflection possible, what phenomenology after Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty would locate starting from the lived-body

immersed in the lived-world, the *lebenswelt*. Originally, however, time and space come into being simultaneously with the original creative gesture of human worlding as storytelling. Naming is like Escher's sketch of the hand drawing itself drawing itself. Storytelling is a thin skin stretched over a very ordinary I-know-not-what so that by concealing it something of it might be revealed in the concealment.

The fundamental horror of this existential I-know-not-what can be conceived as "anonymity," as Emmanuel Levinas has suggested; the Sartrean "nothingness" that is nevertheless 'something' and thus not "no thing" but not yet "some thing" either; nausea; a rustling on the verge of meaninglessness; despair; Kierkegaardian anxiety; a bottomless, Nietzschean abyss; insanity; dissolution, Dionysian dismemberment ... and which, despite the recoil into intentional narrative consciousness opening up or producing a human world that is free of the terror, nevertheless remains 'there' (everywhere and nowhere) like an invisible monster threatening the flimsy, narrative home of my consciousness at every instant, what Levinas dubbed the "il y a," the bleak, anonymous, and impersonal "there is" of being. Sometimes this monstrous horror breaks through the walls in experiences of extreme deprivation and breakdown of the narrative self, as in prolonged solitary confinement, exile, dementia, despair, insomnia, being shunned, or other such breakdowns of the enduring, continuous narrative sense of self,

breakdowns that may lead to breakthroughs for the conventional consciousness.

Stories/myths/fables—the ones we tell our friends and acquaintances, and the larger social/political/cultural ones we create collectively and subscribe to in the construction of our own sense of reality as the altar upon which we make our life sacrifice—keep us from dissolution into the horror of this pre-human anonymity, like campfires that beat back the darkness around our fearful huddling, hopeful but estranged. I retreat into this lit-up space of consciousness that is like a clearing in the woods. I take up my abode there, breathing a sigh of relief in the comforting light of worlding myths and stories: creation myths, cultural myths, personal identity myths and fables, how my life happens—storytelling within storytelling! This retreat into intentional narrative consciousness that I feel myself to be does not happen all at once. It is a continuous ‘event’ defining my common human interpersonal life in the world. Outside of this ... but, alas, there is no outside of this, as far as we know.

Yet, what if, instead of whitewashing over the unknowable origin of our human narrative situation, what if I were to confront the terror and invite the threatening monster in for a cup of philosophical tea? In other words: Suppose I should choose to see clearly what-is-happening instead of blindly accepting the overarching stories I am told to believe, the stories I wrap around my existential dread and despair, the flesh of my life? What then?

Would I become invisible? Would I even exist? Perhaps it is inevitable that the seeker must pack up and leave.

## The Work of Art

Squinting into the eternal light,  
the infinite blaze unhinged,  
unfocused beyond being,  
the seeking eye of the poet  
beholds beauty, justice, love, hope,  
truth, passion, mystery, madness or  
whatever he or she names it,  
birthing it into being.  
A portion of the poet-self  
dies into the madness  
of this poetic midwifery as  
he or she or whatever remains  
is held fast in awe,  
made almost speechless  
by the impossible opening  
of this invisibility  
forged into the beheld,  
compensated solely  
by the scribbled proof  
that it was  
once seen.

## 5. Truth-speaking: An Alternative View of Truth

The stories and myths that cover up conventional 'non-truths' are illusory fictions, and, when they are believed to be unquestionably objectively true, they become delusional, self-constraining beliefs. Plato showed us this in his well-known Allegory of the Cave. Belief-in such illusions, mistaking them for objectively certain truths, mistaking them for real reality...this is the source of great harm and suffering among conventional people. These false beliefs and fictitious narratives structure values that guide people in their practical judgments and everyday actions, for better or worse. We don't realize how we are our own worst enemy.

Opposed to this absolutist view of believing in some ultimate truth as a ground and foundation of everyday consciousness, is not a rampant relativism, as some postmodern views seem to suppose, but the idea of *truth-speaking between persons in a context*. We may not have absolute knowledge of any ultimate truths existing independent of subjectivity, but we can approach truth in speaking with others through an ethical inter-subjectivity where supposedly

“objective” truth is originally understood as “truth-speaking,” the saying of one to another.

In this view, truth is not the correspondence of some assertion with the way things are *in actuality*, ‘out there’, in and of themselves—the objective, naïve, empirical, reductive, materialist, scientific version of truth. Rather, truth-speaking seeks its fullness in a correspondence between what I say to you and the cognitive pre-counterpart of this—my cognitive, intuitive, remembered, imagined, or lived experience of what it is that I desire or want to say, what I mean. I speak the truth when I say what is ‘on my mind’ or ‘in my heart’ without prejudice or interest in the outcome of my saying it, an attitudinal positioning that is easier to say than to accomplish since truth-speaking is correlated with detachment from outcomes. Truth-speaking is, thus, always a local, social, and interpersonal affair, whereas the grasping and conquering of ultimate truth always aspires to be universal and impersonal, independent of subjectivity, dominant, abstracted, authoritative and detached from any lived human life in-the-world, as if that would be a fault. This epistemological depersonalization is consequently harmful to people every day in many ways that they do not expect.

The difference between these two versions of truth will make all the difference to how you go about living your life. All of what we do not know from the perspective of ultimate truth can be approached meaningfully (though *not absolutely*) in our speaking

with others and living with others, apart from whom our own existence would be impossible. Subjectivity is first and always-already an intersubjectivity.

The irony of this is that even right now as I am striving to speak truly, I am not sure that I am accomplishing that since I can only do my best to conjure you at this point, Dear Reader, and patiently listen for your response as I write, since it is impossible to write without a reader in mind. Meanwhile, I will continue working on the refinement of my side of this conversation as I learn to speak the truth without fear, which is not a wealth or a power, but a poverty....

MIRRORS      MIROIRS

Running  
through yesterday's  
sideshow  
of mirrors  
bending  
their extremities  
as though  
in perverse attempt  
to realize  
the extremes  
of self-esteem:  
now short  
squat  
and wobbly  
then beefy equatorial bulge  
and  
finally  
so  
tall  
and  
thin  
the  
very  
light  
seems  
to  
ripple  
through  
my  
lean-  
ness.

En traversant  
au temps jadis  
le grand cirque  
des miroirs  
courbent  
les extrémités'  
comme si  
par essai pervers  
pour se rendre compte  
les extremes  
du moi-meme:  
quelquefois court  
nain  
et flottant  
puis bombé à la hanche  
et  
enfin  
si  
grand  
si  
mince  
que la  
lumiere  
elle-même  
semble  
passer  
en sauts  
à travers  
ma  
mai-  
greur.

## 6.

# Truth-speaking and the Practice of Poverty

Truth-speaking is actualized and fulfilled through the overcoming of or detachment from desire aimed at and born of self-interest manifested in concern for the outcomes of our saying this or that. If we care how others might judge what we say, for example, we will not speak truthfully. But you might object, if we speak without caring how others are affected, our words might hurt someone's feelings. I would say that falsely believing that you have the power to hurt someone's feelings is a sign of the conventional attitude. I alone (with God) am the author and origin of my inner states and cede power over them to nobody. So, please speak your truth. I can take it.

The absence of desire is non-attachment or detachment. Detachment is letting-go and not-having the satisfaction of closure, of pure presence: poverty of mind, body, spirit. Material poverty. Power poverty. Emotional poverty. Spiritual poverty. Poverty poverty. Only along this way of poverty understood and lived as non-attachment is it possible to overcome our own undoing in these matters.

True poverty is like a deep pool of still water with nowhere to go except exactly where it is already.

Poverty is knowing when enough is enough, stopping there, the ascetic of withholding satiety, stopping short of fulfillment, in anticipation of the infinite and immortal which never achieves satiety. Not degradation or destitution of necessities, although suffering is proportionate to desire, but the poverty of innocence, like the simple poverty of a newborn baby. The humble yet sovereign and shameless poverty of the naked face or hand....

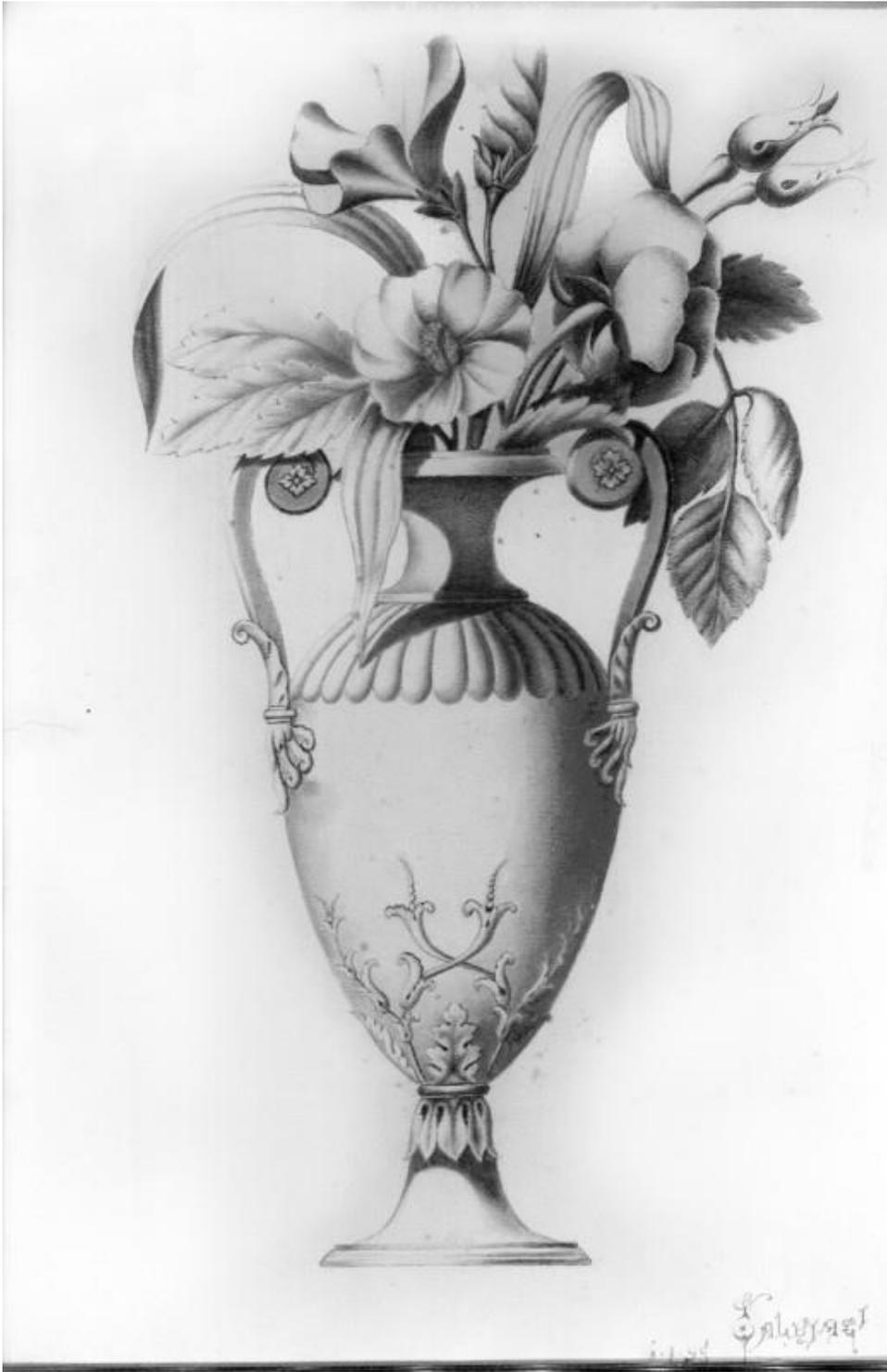
Poverty flows from embracing the emptiness and fullness of simplicity everywhere in all things. Giving away without expectation of return and the letting-go of non-attachment are first cousins. Not caring about what is beyond my control; caring much about what is. These practices are developmental for poverty.

Looking Eastward toward the unfettering of sovereign reason: regardless of what touches me, I remain untouched. Regardless of what moves me, I remain unmoved. Non-ownership. Dispossession. Dis-interest in how it turns out. With disinterest in outcomes smiling energy blossoms on its own in my body, in my world. Lightheartedness and joy bring new engagements within the possibilities of a vision born out of itself. Without desire, yet everything happens as it should.

When I am not invested in the outcome of my actions, my actions are most free of prejudice, most natural and easy and, thus, when I speak, spoken most truly. When I am not invested in the

form of my perceptions, my seeing is most clear and free of bias and blur. Because it does not matter to me how things are, things appear to me as they are, as they must necessarily be, freely and as if on their own.

Seeing things as they are allowed to show themselves on their own terms is to live in the truth the way a tree lives in the earth, the way a child *is* her body. Saying what I know truly, the way flowers bloom and birds sing. That is how I choose to plant my feet in the earth, yet I am not the sole cause of how I grow.



*Drawing by my grandfather, Luigi Galbiati*

*II.*

*LEARNING FROM THE PAST*

## 7. Space, Time, Being, and the Virtues

**Jean-Paul Sartre:** *"I am who I am not and am not who I am."*

**Friedrich Nietzsche:** *"Become who you are!"*

**Lao-tze:** *"Act without acting" (wu wei)*

**Ignatius of Loyola:** *"Do what you are doing."*

People sometimes ask about the meaning of life. The very fact that we can pose this question at all should give us pause to wonder. But, despite the fact that it is an exceedingly interesting and naturally arising question, it is almost always posed as an obviously fruitless question, a kind of rhetorical joke. The "meaning of life" question is fodder for stand-up comedians. You know, like why would you even bother to ask such an impossible question? Just for laughs? The meaning of life, right! Ha, ha!

One could question what might be lurking in that laughter. For example, might that laughter be a mask that hides (and thus reveals) some unspeakable terror best left tucked away behind all

the ancient, fictional life-stories gathering dust in the attic that deflect from questioning if there is any meaning to life at all?

Folks nowadays do not really expect a meaningful answer from philosophers about the meaning of life, what sense life makes, how we should best live it, etc., although they should. Life does not have one, clear, absolute meaning, and it never will. The question of the meaning of life is somewhat disingenuous, suggesting that there must be a meaning to life in order to be able to inquire about it even if it is impossible to say what that meaning is. A soundbite certainly won't suffice. Life can be seen to be essentially and thoroughly ambiguous and paradoxical. No matter how much you try to 'figure it out' life never gets figured out (neither life in general nor anyone's personal life, at least not until we die and our obit will finally tell all) because just when you get comfortable looking at it one way, life starts coming at you from another. Life cannot be pinned down to one single absolute meaning. It can only be lived in its meaningful ambiguity by you or me or someone. This ambiguity makes life both rewarding and challenging.

There are (at least) three major sources of ambiguity interwoven into the experience of my human life. These three fundamental ambiguities originate from my lived experience of being, space, and time.

I experience an ambiguous tension between the discovery of myself as a solitary, separate, autonomous individual, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, an inescapably social being

immersed, even before I know it, in a web-like sociality of connection with others without whom I would not have any sense of who I am at all, like being simultaneously one and many. I call this the “ambiguity of being.”

Secondly, I experience myself as always living in the present moment. It is surely in the present moment that I experience everything, including the future and the past (insofar as it is possible to represent these unrepresentable modalities) but when I go looking for the present moment, I find that it both never arrives and/or is always just gone, as if it were stuck in the past or condemned Forever to the future. It seems, then, that I live in some “in-between” world, almost there, but not quite. I call this presence/not presence the “ambiguity of time” or temporality.

Thirdly, I experience myself as inescapably occupying a physical, bodily place in the world—I am bodily always here, there, or somewhere—and yet, on the other hand, this ‘here or there’ has no ultimate reference point by which it could be distinguished from being anywhere or nowhere. The cosmos has no built-in up or down, no coordinates at all. I call that indeterminacy the “ambiguity of space.”

Here is a closer look at these three fundamental ambiguities of lived life, living ambiguities that constitute the body and soul of my everyday lived experience of being in the world but are shoved into the background of my conscious life, for it is hard to function efficaciously in the face of paradox and the ambiguous.

## ***1. The ambiguity of being: solitude and sociality....***

I see myself as a solitary, separate, autonomous individual, seeing immediately the presumptive bias of this description for at the same time that I experience myself as this separate individuality, I also perceive myself to be essentially connected to and fundamentally dependent upon others, connected in a pre-conscious, sort of 'social contact' at the level of sensibility, an automatic responsiveness to the presence of others, something I cannot avoid. I 'feel' you, in some kinesthetic 'spiritual' sense, before I know that I feel you.

I could not exist without others. The idea of there being only one human being in the world at the start, like a first human being existing before any other human being existed, is an impossibility. A first and only human could have no world, no language, no anything. Humans are ontogenetically social. Certainly, I find that I need time alone. But, at the same time, I never want to be totally cut off from the social world with others and, in fact, never could be since I am born out of that world and am thus of that world essentially. I carry my social world with me wherever I go.

Exile, shunning, and solitary confinement are punishments for a good reason. These experiences cut us off from our social source of selfhood and identity. The fundamental importance of human social contact and interaction is also reflected negatively in

the phenomenon of feral children, children raised with little or no human contact. They are usually stunted in terms of their human development, language, social and cognitive skills, etc.

The ambiguity of being both a separate being while also essentially connected to others involves a three-part tension. First, as solitary, we struggle against getting lost in an impersonal anonymity against which we must strive to be a real person, a somebody. Second, as social beings, we are both for-others and, contradictorily, for-ourselves (egoism versus altruism). Third, although in the world we are inescapably both alone and with-others, we are constantly struggling to find the right balance between these two in our practical life. Try as we will, however, these three life tensions are never absolutely resolved in some final solution.

*Psych Note – False existential resolution of the ambiguity of being: the person develops rigidity and inflexibility of character (armor), and is unable to bend, accommodate, or adapt. Who I am is identified with what I do—doing replaces being—or with some other social role I play. Overly disciplined or controlled and controlling personality type. Attempt to subdue and dominate what is other (including ‘self’ operationalized and perceived as ‘other’) by reducing the other conceptually (conquering) or losing oneself in a fusion with the other (pleasure) or withdrawing into self (hermit)....*

## ***2. The ambiguity of time: being present and not present...***

We desire to be somebody, to have a solid identity, a whole self, and yet we are constantly on-the-way to ourselves without ever arriving at some finished identity that would establish who we are. On the one hand, we already *are* someone; we have genuine being. I am me, of course; but not exactly. Here is another ambiguity internal to the self. "I" and "me" are certainly closely related though not identical moments of the self, the former being a kind of subject-pole or agency, and the latter, a passive-receptive object-pole of the self. On the other hand, I find myself in a constant state of development where "I am not who I am and am who I am not." I never achieve real being at any given instant of myself, never finally, actually become the person I always already must be in order to become anyone. From this paradoxical perspective, I will only be who I really am, really identical with myself, when I am dead. My obit will finally sum up my life.

Like a river, though I exist always as the me who I am, I am yet constantly flowing and never the same, always different and changing, but at the same time paradoxically equaling myself in an existential identity: I am who I am. My felt or lived identity, almost miraculously, stays the same and persists throughout all the changes of my life, the ups and the downs, the good and the bad. I am uniquely distinguishable from all others despite never becoming someone who could actually be distinguishable.

This ambiguity reflects the fact that we are temporal beings, that we only exist in time, now or then or sometime. Existentially, I always exist in the present, which, paradoxically, is always present and yet never present. The present is never absolutely and fully present. It is always shaving off into the past or into anticipations of the future. The present, which is always now, paradoxically, never actually arrives since whenever we go looking for it, it is always just gone or yet to be. "Now" does not stand still. It is truly said that time flows like a river. We are that river: always present while always gone; always the same while always different. The ancient philosopher Heraclitus nailed it when he said: You can never step into the same river twice because it is never the same river and you are never the same person. Such is the ambiguity of temporality.

*Psych Note – False resolution of the ambiguity of time: the person lives in the past, the 'glory' days of bygone years, focusing on past accomplishments or relationships or on where they have come from, the family they were born into, or where they have been, past successes. Also, alternately, a person lives in the future, always focused on plans or schemes or ideas that never materialize, dreamer type, lost in the realm of possibility and potential, never taking the first step of the thousand-mile journey, unable to be here and now living the ambiguity of life in all its fulsome incompleteness....*

### ***3. The ambiguity of space: a place that 'is' no place....***

As an embodied being I automatically have a place in the world that is uniquely my own; I am 'here' or 'there', by the necessity of embodiment always 'somewhere'. And yet there is no *ultimate* reference point by which I can establish this existential 'here' or 'there' as absolutely being somewhere. Being here or there is just as much being anywhere or nowhere; place is relative. It is a place or a space that is purely self-referential, establishing itself upon its own foundation. It is a room without walls, floor, or ceiling. It is 'there' and yet not there at all.

We are at home on the earth in a bodily space that we cannot help but occupy and thus is always there as a necessary given, my claim upon existence. And yet, on the other hand, we have no idea where we are at all, no certain center by which we could calculate our coordinates. Space appears to be an infinite magnitude without reference points. I find myself here, which sounds like I know where I am, and yet I am just as much essentially lost; we all are. Worse than lost, as I have said, since lost presupposes a place where we might be found—a luxury we do not have in our natural condition, we earthlings.

No residence on earth is permanent. The earth itself is not permanent. Everything that comes into being will go out of being, we learned from the presocratic philosophers. How that stacks up for the expanding cosmos, whether it will collapse back in on itself like a stretched rubber band or "expand" Forever is anybody's

guess. What “expanding” means is unclear when it comes to the cosmos, which may be expanding in all directions simultaneously from every point of itself. We are nomadic wanderers, and yet we are at home wherever we are and we could not be otherwise. I am always someplace and yet the boundaries of this space are never fixed or permanent, as much as I might want them to be, as if I am never anywhere. Even the skin covering my body like a mask is a permeable membrane, letting the outside in and the inside out, as in respiration, without boundaries even at the boundary where I and the world intermingle. Where the physical space that I occupy begins and ends is no clearer than the boundaries of the social space I establish. I try to fence in a space and call it "mine" and yet it is impossible to keep others out or to keep myself safely in it. Existentially, we are lost with no possibility of ever being found.

*Psych Note – False resolution of the ambiguity of space: person focuses on ownership and possessions, affirming and identifying what they own and possess, thinking that ownership of a big house, fine clothes, and nice property will solidify one’s ambiguous and shaky spatial ground of being worse than lost; rigidly defined interpersonal boundaries. Or, on the other hand, complete lack of boundaries, unable to accomplish stability and productivity, being lost and easily led astray in a life of dissipation or thoughtless conventionality...*

#### *4. True resolution of the unresolvable....*

We struggle naturally against the stress produced by the three fundamental and unavoidable ambiguities of life, trying to resolve them into non-ambiguous meaningfulness. We become frustrated by the futility of the task, however, because it is impossible to do. False resolutions are like frontal attacks against these ambiguities using force or power or abandonment to overcome or eradicate them, which is fruitless.

We can become lost in these ambiguities existentially. We can become afraid and unsure, thinking life should be otherwise and yet unsure what to do about it. A cloud of 'unknowing' can envelop us leading to illusory confusion, delusion, and despair. Our castle of homeostasis surrounded by a mote of well-being can be shaken to the foundations by life's ambiguities and, like quicksand, only get worse if we struggle against them. Our sense of security and being grounded can crumble as if by an earthquake and my life can unexpectedly come undone. Ambiguity breeds uncertainty until we are no longer sure what is real or what we should do or how we should be. Unfortunately, the direct assault on these ambiguities, trying to eradicate them like noxious weeds or unwanted, invasive species, does not work and leaves us frustrated and unhappy. What to do?

Perhaps the biggest ambiguity of all involves the fact that these ambiguities cannot be resolved and overcome by force of will, and yet we must constantly strive to deal with them as inescapable,

integral, and challenging aspects of life. Only my death will finally resolve these ambiguities for me once and for all, but I won't be around to enjoy the closure. Otherwise, what is required is a strenuous way of life that, in one sense, overcomes them by a kind of inner 'dying' or detachment from the outcomes envisioned by a resolution of identity-ambiguity, a finally becoming 'somebody', but does so by learning to live with them rather than trying to banish them from the kingdom, inviting them in for tea rather than barring the door against them.

To accomplish this task of accommodation, adaptation, and integration we need ambassadors to intercede with the ambiguities. For me, such ambassadors are what is traditionally called the virtues, the pursuit of excellences by which we can create a harmonious way of living in a world of ambiguity. The virtues that I most often focus on and think of as my ten counselors or cabinet members are: Knowledge, Courage, Temperance, Friendliness, Justice, Poverty, Chastity, Obedience, Simplicity, and Patience. These ambassadors are guided in their intercessions on my behalf with the ambiguities of life by the Chairman of the Board: Discernment.

## 8. Discernment and the Ethics of Self-Actualization

### *1. The Way of Wisdom*

From its earliest stirrings at the very dawn of human history, what would come to be called “philosophy”—the love of wisdom—was a way of life embodied by individual lovers of wisdom. These seekers of the ultimate, sublime, and meaningful were somehow awakened from their unquestioning slumber by the magic of wonder. For the ancients, philosophy was not merely an abstract discourse ensconced in a course of academic studies set apart from the real world in which you live and laugh and love and die—as it all too often is today in academia. In ancient Greece and in other parts of the ancient world, the original impulse to philosophical discourse was truly grounded in a way of life geared to practical wisdom. And it still can and should be today. But what, exactly, is this way of life that these wonder-inspired lovers of wisdom were awakened to?

The basic gesture of the philosophical way of life involves an actively receptive, thoughtful, questioning, and creative way of living in the real world. It is a way of life guided by practical wisdom developed over thousands of years and passed down from one generation to the next, all the way to the present day. This living way of wonder and wisdom, however, has become obscured in our technologically driven 'information age'. Contrary to current expectations, great masses of easily accessed information will never amount to genuine wisdom. Wisdom is not accumulated data.

The philosophical way of life is a continual process of creating yourself in relation to others and the world in which you live. It is a way of spiritual growth and development. Your way of life, how you live and die, is the most important philosophical task in life. It is a mission that is given to you whether you like it or not as a birthright accompanying membership in the human community. It is a mission that distinguishes you from all other kinds of living beings. It is a god-like task, a spiritual-emotional-intellectual-physical adventure. Ultimately, it is an invitation to become immortal, a natural possibility for humans. To fail at this task is to miss the opportunity of a lifetime.

There are three questions that I think are centrally important parts of that ancient philosophical way of life: Who am I? How do I relate to others? What do I want to do with my life? These three existential questions cannot be answered by any abstract academic

discipline or logical deduction, yet you must answer these questions for yourself since they are an unavoidable part of your life. No one can answer these questions for you, and how you answer these questions for yourself will make all the difference in the world!

## *2. Virtue Ethics and Self-actualization*

One of the ways that the history of philosophy has approached those three important life questions mentioned above is from the practice of virtue. Virtue can be understood as the pursuit of “excellence” in any endeavor, whether it is playing the violin, getting a college degree, raising a family, or working at a job. A well-lived life is a virtuous life. But to live life well it is necessary for you to develop certain qualities in yourself. Thus, to live your life well, to genuinely achieve the good life, the best possible life, is to embark upon a path of spiritual growth and self-development, a life of self-actualization.

Self-transformation and the achievement of wisdom is an essential goal of the philosophical way of life. Fortunately, the desire for this achievement of excellence is ‘hard-wired’ into your natural orientation to grow and develop and get better. Everyone naturally wants to be the best person they can be, even if we get this wrong sometimes. All you need to do is say “Yes!” to this

natural desire and you will be on your way. What is this natural desire?

You will be guided in your pursuit of excellence or in your development of virtue by your natural desire to do what is good for you. If you reflect on your living, you will notice that whatever you do, you always believe—more or less consciously—that what you are doing is good for you. Whether it is joining a soccer team, studying engineering, hanging out with your friends, developing a military career, or even getting drunk on a Saturday night, you always think that what you are doing is good for you in some way or other. It is reasonable to do so. Of course, after you do something like having too much to drink you may discover that what you thought was good for you really wasn't good, or it was good for a while but then became not good. Nevertheless, you always set out thinking that what you are going to do will be good for you, even though you sometimes miss the mark. Nobody in their right mind sets out to do what is not good for them! Still, hitting the mark of the good can be challenging. That's where the virtues come in.

In every culture throughout the world, and often in different historical periods of the same culture, you will find various virtues held up as models or ideals that you can use as goals or targets for your spiritual growth and development, sort of like blueprints or ideals for accomplishing the good life.

In ancient Greece, the virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, justice, and piety were among the most important goals for guiding yourself in your personal self-development. Plato and Aristotle emphasized these virtues. Other Greek philosophers included these major virtues as part of their philosophies but also emphasized somewhat different ideals. Skeptics, like Sextus Empiricus, for example, emphasized the suspension of judgment regarding what is unknowable as a way of achieving tranquility, what you might think of today as being non-judgmental. Stoic philosophers such as Epictetus emphasized serenity, harmony with the natural order, clear thinking, and dispassionate calmness achieved by learning to distinguish between what is under your control and what is not, focusing your efforts on the former while letting go of the latter. The Epicureans, on the other hand, focused on a refinement, moderation, and careful balance of pleasures as a life goal.

In a later period, Christian culture was organized around a somewhat different set of virtues. These ideals included a general love (*agapē*) for all (even your enemies!), forgiveness, compassion, patience, humility, and obedience to the will of God. The actual living development of such virtues set Christians apart from their pagan neighbors. During the monastic period or the so-called Dark Ages in Europe, the virtues of poverty, chastity, obedience, and simplicity were emphasized in the theocratic way of life at the time. A favorite medieval virtue was prudence. These Christian virtues

can be contrasted with the virtue of personal power in Nietzsche's philosophy, or the virtue of selfishness in the philosophy of Ayn Rand. The virtues are many but virtue in itself is always the same: the pursuit of excellence.

In ancient China, you will find a focus on somewhat different virtues. Among the Taoists as represented in the philosophy of Lao-tzu, for example, there is an emphasis on the virtues of openness, receptivity, non-contention, simplicity, frugality, going-with-the-flow, harmony with nature, and acting by not acting (*wu wei*). Confucius also included a reverence or respect for your ancestors among the various virtues. Mencius, like Kant, focused more on living in accordance with law and order and doing your duty. Buddhists, such as the Dalai Lama, exalt the virtues of boundless compassion, altruistic love, responsibility for others, and your 'overall state of heart and mind' (*kun long*) as the spiritual qualities that lead to living the good life.

Throughout the ages, and in our own present day, there have been many different virtues held up as targets to aim at in the process of guiding your spiritual growth and development, targets geared toward living the best possible life you can live. As you can see, often these virtues overlap and sometimes they contrast with one another. One of the first things you will have to decide along your unique path of personal growth in excellence in this world is which virtues make the most sense to you. But even after you have decided on a set of virtues you want to live in accordance with and

have learned to settle contention among the virtues themselves, it will still be necessary to actively create or construct your Self in accordance with the virtues you have chosen. That will require a lifetime commitment to a daily practice of self-actualization. Are you ready to make such a commitment in the service of living the best possible life?

Plato compared the process of creating yourself in accordance with virtuous ideals to an artist creating a statue out of a slab of stone, chipping away here and there until the stone takes on the form of the idea of what the artist wants to create but which at first exists only in the artist's mind as an idea. This analogy is an image of the process of self-actualization. It is not something you can accomplish all at once, of course. Like any great work of art, the creation of yourself takes time and requires a sustained, focused effort that you must take up every day of your life. Much reflective awareness is necessary. If you are not careful, you can accidentally chip off an ear or a finger of your 'living statue' and ruin all the good work you had accomplished up to that point!

It is not always a simple matter to hit the mark of the virtue you are aiming at. Aristotle thought that there are two ways you can miss the target: by an excess or a lack, either going overboard or doing nothing. He envisioned virtue as the ethical 'mean' between these two extremes. Take the virtue of courage, for example. Basically, courage is the spiritual quality in ourselves that we develop when we confront and overcome our unrealistic fears.

Everyone has unrealistic fears. It may be a fear of public speaking, a fear of moving to a new place, a fear of heights, or a fear of trying something we have never tried before. It takes courage to confront these fears. When we do confront them and overcome them in a self-transformative way, we develop the spiritual quality of courage in ourselves, the development of which paves the way to greater happiness. A lack of courage creates cowardice; and an unrealistic excess of courage creates recklessness. A warrior who turns and runs from the pitch of battle is a coward; one who rushes into battle unprepared is reckless. The mean between cowardice and recklessness is the virtue of courage, facing your fears with planning and foresight. This is a moderate point of balance between the two vices. Hence, Aristotle thought that “moderation in all things” was the way of happiness. He called this the “golden mean.” Now try applying that practically in your everyday life.

Although Aristotle’s approach to living the good life is insightful, it does not provide any absolute, definitive answers. Moderation in all things—the mean between extremes—certainly defines a balanced approach to living, but it is an abstract, general principle. It is not always easy to determine the ‘golden mean’. Suppose, for example, I am a student and I want to overcome my fear of public speaking. I decide to use the classes I am taking at school to do this. That’s a good plan. So, I muster my courage and begin raising my hand in the classroom posing questions and contributing my thoughts and ideas. Excited by initial success, I

begin to ask more and more questions and make more and more remarks in class and, without realizing it (since I am focused on overcoming my fear), I inadvertently start dominating class discussions, not giving others time to speak, interrupting, insisting on my view, etc., much to the other students' dismay and disapproval. I miss the target of courage by being too reckless in my pursuit of it. And, at the same time, I err on the lack side of the virtues of justice and respect.

Or take another example. Suppose I think that I am drinking alcohol to excess and decide to moderate my behavior without going to the other extreme of complete abstinence. Is one drink per day moderation? Or is having any amount of alcohol every day excessive? If I were at a friend's wedding would having three or four drinks still be within the parameters of moderation? The basic rule that you should always seek the 'golden mean' does not provide ready answers to these specific questions that arise in specific situations in your life. Therefore, what is needed along the path of trying to live excellently or virtuously is the all-important power of discernment. What is discernment?

### *3. The Power of Discernment*

Although it is often thought to apply narrowly to the determination of supernatural phenomena such as discerning God's will, discernment can also be thought more broadly as a basic power of the human mind to distinguish and evaluate and thus come to see more clearly. It is a power like perception, reasoning,

imagination, judgment, understanding, memory, etc. that the human mind is capable of engendering. Discernment is the power of the mind to identify and separate clearly and definitively one thing from another by discovering what is different and what is the same about those things. While it is possible to think about discernment in and of itself (which is already a use of discernment, distinguishing it from other mental abilities), discernment works in harmony with all your intellectual or cognitive powers. Obviously, if you never perceived or understood anything or if you were unable to represent situations imaginatively to yourself, you would have nothing to discern about.

You use your power of discernment when you distinguish one idea from another, as when you distinguish happiness from pleasure (not an easy thing to do). Discernment is determining what is the same and what is different about these two ideas. You also use discernment when you distinguish one feeling or thought from another or in trying to see what you should do at any choice point in your life regarding, for example, your love life, the work you do, your social relations with others, or any practical matter whatsoever that requires making life-changing decisions.

From a moral perspective, discernment is the ability to see clearly and distinctly what you should do and what you should not do. That is easier said than done in all instances. Discernment would surely be involved when you try to calculate in advance the amount of pleasure and pain the consequences of your actions will

cause or, from a deontological perspective, what the true but elusive motive of your actions might be and what would happen if everyone did what you have done or are about to do. Consequently, you can see how important developing your power of discernment is to living the best possible life.

Practical wisdom can be thought of as proficiency in discernment. Discernment is seeing what is happening clearly and distinctly, and seeing what is happening clearly and distinctly is the royal road to happiness and, perhaps, immortality, since clearly seeing and removing impediments to development rarifies and removes the dross from the soul, as Plato might say, making it ready for its new life as immortal diamond.

You can develop your power of discernment. As with all your intellectual powers, developing discernment is accomplished through practice, practice, practice! Here are some specific suggestions, a few gymnastics for the mind that you might consider adopting as practices of your own:

1. Avoid black and white thinking. Regarding moral questions there is rarely, if ever, an answer that is universally and objectively correct, an answer that you can then simply and mindlessly plug into any specific situation. Instead, learn to think along a continuum in degrees of better and worse, more or less, for all things blend into one another, which is why discernment is so important. Envision and evaluate alternatives fairly.

2. Activate your critical thinking skills. Learn to ask questions and look at situations from various alternative perspectives, realizing that one perspective can never give you the whole picture. Seek out the opinions of others and take these into consideration in your deliberations.

3. Study your habits of thinking on a regular basis and challenge yourself about your perceptual prejudices. Read Epictetus, for example, and see whether you still believe that others can cause you to be angry, or cause in you the desire for something you didn't think you wanted. Practice focusing your energy on what is within your power to do something about and letting go of what is not.

4. Articulate your thoughts and ideas to your friends or write them out in your journal so you hear yourself talking. Don't worry about where to begin or you may get nowhere. Just start writing or talking and see where it goes.

5. Take a walk in the forest or mountains and talk things over out loud with yourself and the more-than-human natural community.

6. Make a commitment today—right now!—to live a more focused, mindful way of life.

## 9.

# The Breakdown of Philosophical Practice

The original gesture of philosophical commitment in the Western tradition was a personal, rational, everyday therapeutic practice and way of life. Only secondarily and derivatively would it become a way of figuring things out. The study of philosophy from its birth out of an unfettered wondering about everything, was predominantly meant to lead, through a process of spiritual exercises and a search for understanding, to the alleviation of human suffering and the production of the greatest human happiness for the aspirant philosopher. That can be seen very clearly in the development of philosophical practice in the ancient world of the pagan Greeks.

The philosophical work of skeptics like Sextus Empiricus, for example, were aimed directly at the achievement of personal tranquility, personal self-development, and the enjoyment of life. Socrates, too, sought to defend the natural philosophical life of reflection upon one's beliefs and actions, with all its intellectual pleasures, from the hypocrisy of sophistic entrepreneurs who would use philosophical knowledge for commercial gain. But even

the sophists understood the study of philosophy as oriented to practical worldly success.

The personal practical orientation of philosophical study in the ancient world is also clearly reflected in early Stoicism with its goal of *ataraxia* (tranquility) born of right living based on reason and harmony with nature. Epictetus, for example, working out of his little school known as “the hospital” in the second century C.E., clearly viewed philosophy as a healing, developmental endeavor, believing that the proper goal of philosophy was to produce the *sophos*, the wise person, the person of *arête* (virtue), who knew how to live excellently with a calm, serene spirit, and a profound enjoyment of being in the world.

This same life-affirming goal of philosophical study is reflected in the well-balanced hedonistic philosophy of the Epicureans. There is Epicurus, for example, hanging out in his garden, asserting that any philosophical study that does not relieve human suffering has little value. And even among natural philosophers like Pythagoras, and academic philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, there is a preeminent understanding that philosophy is *a way of life*, and that this way of life is aimed at living the very best possible life, a claim that is amply demonstrated in the work of Pierre Hadot on the ancient Greek schools of philosophy.

But with the advent of Christianity, according to Hadot, the natural therapeutic orientation of philosophy—a way of life in the world geared to personal tranquility, serenity, pleasure, happiness

and the joyful pursuit of virtuous excellence—is now made to be the handmaiden of an otherworldly metaphysical theology, what Heidegger will call “ontotheology,” a story that was amplified and dispersed by thinkers such as Augustine, who would endeavor long and hard to purify philosophy of its pagan roots and make it conform to his vision of the emergent Christianity of the fifth century. The Western *zeitgeist* hasn’t been the same since.

The absorption, use, and abuse of philosophy by the Roman Catholic Church to support Christian dogmatic doctrine, will be continued throughout the monastic tradition in Europe during the Dark Ages and will culminate in what has come to be known as Medieval Philosophy. Here, in the hands of practitioners such as Anselm and Thomas Aquinas, and many other churchmen, philosophy will be geared wholly toward justifying the theological aspirations and value orientation of the Roman Catholic Church. Philosophy must take a back seat to Scripture and “revelation.”

From the perspective of Christian metaphysics, the good life is no longer seen as a natural life of happiness in the world. Now, indentured to the evangelical aspirations of the Roman Catholic Church, as the servant of religious dogma, philosophy is now understood, not as a way of life in the world, but as a way of freeing the imprisoned soul trapped in a physical body from the dangerous garden of passing earthly delights in which it is immersed and abandoned thanks to Original Sin and the Fall, and, through this sacrifice of the way of the world, securing for itself a place in an

otherworldly heavenly abode for all eternity. Philosophy is now interpreted as a way of saving your immortal soul by separating it from the corrupting influences of the natural world, with all its associated delights and sensual pleasures, especially sexual pleasures. Certain parts of the natural human body got lost precisely there, covered over by foliage, and are perhaps still lost, as if it were somehow shameful to be a natural person....

That degradation of the pagan wisdom tradition can still be seen very clearly in the theological underpinning of early Modern philosophers such as Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Locke, and Berkeley. David Hume, on the other hand, scorned by the Calvinistic schoolmen of his day because of his unwillingness to bow to religion, and thus outlawed and shunned in the name of their abstruse metaphysical deployment of philosophy to justify the religious domination of the ignorant and unsuspecting masses, may be an exception to this tradition, along with the Sentimentalists. But by this time, philosophy for the most part was already very much lost as a personal healing practice. Hume's thoroughgoing skepticism and natural ethics is a brief gulp of fresh air, although it still comes up short on the side of practice.

At the very outset of his text entitled *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, for example, we hear Hume lamenting this degeneration of philosophy: "*The mere philosopher is a character which is commonly but little acceptable in the world, as being supposed to contribute nothing either to the advantage or pleasure*

*of society, while he lives remote from communication with mankind and is wrapped up in principles and notions equally remote from their comprehension.”* Thus, a little farther on, Hume calls upon philosophers to abandon their metaphysically motivated ivory towers and bring philosophy back into the world where it belongs. *“Be a philosopher,” Hume asserts, “but, amid all your philosophy, be still a man!”*

I'll drink to that. Three cheers!

# 10.

## Notes on the Practice of Transcendental Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is considered to be the “father” of modern transcendental phenomenological philosophy. A mathematician by trade, with interests in philosophy, psychology, science, etc., Husserl was critical of the unreflective presupposition of objectivity in the sciences, especially in the new field of empirical psychology that was developing at that time, a position that was blindly assumed from the perspective of the natural theoretical attitude—the belief that that world of perceived objects is given in its objectivity *simpliciter*, just as it is experienced. This realism is naïve because it fails to account for the conditions for the possibility of having any kind of theoretical knowledge of empirical objectivity at all without taking subjectivity and subjective experience into account—the traditional, narrowly focused scientific approach.

Thinking that such naïve realism was at the root of the general crisis of science in Europe at the time, as well as a failure of science to be guided by less absolutistic and more humanistic values, Husserl desired to find a method for achieving what he called “apodicticity” (logical certitude) within the subjective realm

that was overlooked by science, an apodicticity that would be the universal epistemological bedrock for all sciences, including philosophy, and thus overcoming the naiveté of both the “hard” and the “human” sciences. The core of Husserl’s thinking is represented in what can be called, somewhat misleadingly, his ‘method’ for the practice of Transcendental Phenomenology. As you might expect, the phenomenological method begins from a critique of realism, the naïve natural attitude. Instead of trying to nail down the world objectively as realists think they can do, phenomenology calls for a direct focus on “the things themselves,” by which Husserl means the phenomena of everyday subjective experience, as those phenomena appear to your consciousness, rather than on the mental representations of empirical things with a presumption of their real, independent existence apart from consciousness, as was commonly thought at the time.

Going beyond rationalism and empiricism, the transcendental descriptive method Husserl developed for undertaking phenomenological investigations is a non-dualistic, ethical way of approaching the practice of philosophy through the apprehension and analysis of the necessary conditions for the possibility of subjective experience, what must be the case subjectively for anything to appear at all. By bracketing the presumed objective givenness of things relied upon by empirical science, Husserl develops an approach to the subjective conditions of experience, overlooked by naïve consciousness, from the

position of what he calls the transcendental ego, (which will be criticized as the “view from nowhere” or the God’s-eye view, an impossibility). Because the transcendental ego is unhinged from all empirical, worldly connections outside or transcendent to the world and thus able to discern the universal and necessary conditions for the possibility of things apodictically, or so Husserl thought. He would fail at that task but achieve great success in his failure, a *felix culpa*.

Because phenomenology unlocks the incredibly rich storehouse of subjective experience as a legitimate field of philosophical inquiry, it has been influential in many areas of world culture, including the human, social, and ‘hard’ sciences, as well as law, architecture, film, theology, literature, psychotherapy, the arts, etc. The entire self-understanding of our age has been greatly influenced by phenomenology and its legitimate unlocking of the subjective realm. Yet, conventionally bound contemporary consciousness still malingers in the perceptual prejudices of a naïve realism today, compounded by a liberalism-influenced modernity and a relativistic post-modernity – a phenomenon which may account in part for the dystopic moral dissonance, as well as the erratic and misguided social/political aspirations of our liquid social order at present, with its insurrections, mass shootings, political and ethical polarization, gender/identity confusion, etc. Perhaps transcendental phenomenology can help us to see a way beyond such moral disorder and cultural disarray,

beyond the crisis of our own contemporary world. That was Husserl's hope, expressed in his last, unfinished work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. He hoped that phenomenology would become the universal ground for all science, since science would be meaningless if it were not embedded within a world of subjective experience from which it necessarily originates. Husserl hoped that phenomenology would thus cauterize the depletion of the human spirit at the hands of a false and unsubstantiated positivist objectivity and misguided epistemological realism.

Somewhat arbitrarily, we can consider that Husserl articulated three basic 'steps' to moving out of the natural attitude and adopting and working within phenomenological attitude, three "reductions" or phases of the process that a phenomenologist must personally undergo to be able to put the ideas of phenomenology into actual practice: the epochē, the intuition of essences, and the originary description of phenomena. Certain aspects of these reductions seem more important to me than others. The often-overlooked focus on *attitude* in Husserl's depiction of phenomenology, for example, and the transformation of the phenomenological aspirant's attitude that is required to practice phenomenology—an attitude that Husserl recognized as difficult to achieve and maintain—is a key to the possibility of a phenomenological knowing but often the last thing to be

considered by those who rush headlong to grasp the world objectively.

The first move out of the so-called naïve “natural attitude” and into the phenomenological attitude is through the narrow door of what Husserl called the *epochē*, a notion adopted from the ancient Greek tradition of skepticism. The *epochē* involves a bracketing or suspension of belief in and judgments about whatever is beyond our *clear and distinct* knowledge and experience, the Cartesian criterion for certitude. To believe in something as if it were in our experience when in fact it is not, would be a prejudice (a pre-judgment or decision made in advance of the experience and thinking that is supposed to lead to the decision) barring the way to true understanding.

The bracketing or suspension of judgment about what we do not know clearly and distinctly is the “skeptical” or purifying moment of phenomenology, what makes originary phenomenological description possible. The *epochē* does not involve a denial of the possibility of knowledge. Rather, it is an unwillingness to make knowledge claims when there is insufficient evidence for such claims. By thus restricting descriptions and knowledge claims to what is within our subjective experience, the phenomenologist strives to speak more clearly and exactly in the descriptions of phenomena as experienced, as lived-through, in the spirit of Kantian critique. For example: there are no bad boys, only boys doing things that some people consider “bad.” Therefore,

you should not say to your child “You are bad boy for doing that!” since, first of all, the term “bad” is fundamentally unclear as it stands, but also because the claim is about “badness” inhabiting the boy’s essential nature or being the boy’s essence itself, something which cannot be grasped in a representation and is thus beyond our experience. A more phenomenological way of referring to what is happening from within my experience of this situation, might be to say to the boy: “What you are doing (as I perceive it) is unacceptable to me. Here’s why.” Phenomenologically speaking, what I perceive the boy to be doing and that it is unacceptable for me are things that I can know are certainly true for me, whereas I cannot know the truth of the boy’s essential nature. Thus, I can assert the following as apodictically true: There are no bad boys—only boys doing things that someone judges as bad.

Accomplishing the transition from the perspective of a naïve realist attitude to the perspective of the phenomenological attitude, in my experience, has about the same level of difficulty as quitting smoking or drinking alcohol or going on a serious diet or starting a serious workout regimen and sticking with it, although it took Husserl a little while to realize the full implications of that challenge, thinking at first that the transcendental phenomenological attitude could be accomplished in one fell swoop. *Realizing* that no person or situation has the power to cause me to be angry is good and might happen all at once since it is an inner idea that the transcendental ego would perceive

immanently or all at once, but that realization or insight is far easier to accomplish than actually getting my anger under control once and for all in my everyday life situations. Just trying to change my language about anger can be challenging. Learning to stop saying things in the form of "That person (or situation) *made* me angry" would be a very good accomplishment. Instead, we might say: "I am making myself angry on the occasion of this or that happening." That puts the energy of the situation back under my control where I can work with it.

Husserl believed that the most fundamental and widespread of the perceptual prejudices is the belief in a three-dimensional, independently existing, material world existing apart from consciousness. In fact, this realist thesis—though widely and commonly held as certain knowledge today among scientists—is unjustifiable experientially. We know nothing of how things are in themselves. The *epochē* is intended to safeguard us from this fallacy. Like the false belief that causality is something that actually exists, as Hume pointed out, the belief in a world existing apart from my consciousness of it is merely a customary belief without the possibility of demonstration.

Yet, despite the abundant evidence putting into doubt the belief in a really existing material world apart from consciousness, despite the clear, logical impossibility of demonstrating such a realist claim, people continue to go on talking about material "reality" and "the real world" as if it *is* immediately clear to everyone that

there *is* an independent, material world existing apart from consciousness that *is* immediately available to us through our sensible perception, just as we continue to say incorrectly that the sun “rises” when we know that is not true, or how my immediate experience is that the earth is flat and unmoving despite knowing that is not so. Phenomenology is more interested in your experience of the earth as earth, rather than what science has calculated about it. We don’t live in the scientific world or the world of physics. We live in a subjectively structured world that can only be accessed meaningfully through phenomenology.

Prejudices are numerous and often well-camouflaged in everyday perceptual consciousness. Although Husserl initially thought that the phenomenological attitude could be achieved through the *epochē* all at once, he came to realize that the practice of overcoming perceptual prejudices takes a lifetime of critical self-engagement such that it must become, in my view, and, I think, increasingly in Husserl’s view, *a way of life*—a key dimension of the “ethical” moment of phenomenology since the overcoming of cognitive bias and perceptual prejudices is also the practice of developing virtue. But it is much easier to talk about overcoming perceptual prejudices than it is to actually overcome them in practice. Why? These prejudices support values, beliefs, interpretations, and practices which a person desires more than they desire to see the truth. Some people seem to have a vested interest in the delusional belief that some boys are just born bad,

for example, and will not give up this prejudice easily because it has some kind of (dysfunctional) payoff for them, such as concealing their own parental inadequacies, neglect, or guardianship shortcomings they don't want to face up to.

After the reduction of everyday experiential reality to phenomena through the application of the epochē in stage one, it is possible to turn to the intuition of the essences of the phenomena thus reduced, what Husserl called the *eidetic reduction*, the reduction of the thing to its essential idea or meaning. Since what we now perceive is understood not to be a three-dimensional reality existing apart from our consciousness of it, but phenomena within our consciousness, or appearances to our consciousness, or how things look and appear to us in our experience of them ... we can then begin to intuit the meaningfulness of these or any objects of consciousness such that we will be able to describe the essential aspects of them insofar as we experience them, more fully. The intentionality of the objects of consciousness is their arc of meaningfulness for us. We will be able to do this in great detail, in fact, without ever ascribing to them any absolute reality beyond our perceptual description of the phenomena, almost as if it is the very description that makes them real, such that the fuller our description of them the fuller the phenomena are able to appear. So, if your description, what you assert about an object of experience, stays true to your intuition of that experience, if what you say is adequate to what you intend or mean or want to say, for

example, what you assert, Husserl believed, will be apodictic, that is, logically without falseness, true to your experience of it. What I am trying to say, what I intend to say, is the intentionality of my conscious act of saying, what my saying or describing is about.

One thing should be clearly noted here: the above approach to the intuition of essences and description of phenomenologically reduced experience is easier said than done. It can be challenging to get to the essential aspect of an experience, what it is that necessarily makes that experience be the kind of experience that it is. You have to keep coming at it from different angles, seeing it from different perspectives, like walking around an object to see it from all sides. One way to approach this phenomenologically is through imaginative variation of the intuited experience. If I were trying to describe my experience of being in the classroom, for example, I might imagine how it would be if the classroom were in a prison or if all my students were mandated to be there, or any other imaginative variation that might occur to you. The phenomenological analysis of these imaginative variations of the experience under consideration can then be used to give a fuller description of your intuition. Suppose, for example, you are trying to see your relationship with your significant other more clearly. You might imagine what it would be like if they were suddenly to die. How would that be for you? Such an imagined variation of your current situation, itself experienced and appropriated

phenomenologically, might give you deeper insight into how you are really feeling about your significant other now.

Thus, it is possible to refine our perceptual experience through reflection and more description of variations or perspectives until the essential aspect of the thing shines forth in its fullness, or the common element of similar experiences is becomes clear; what it is that by necessity makes that thing be the kind of thing it is; the essential definition of the thing sought in description; what a thing is; the *whatness* of a thing. Like trying to distill the essential element from various experiences of happiness or pleasure or various imagined considerations of it, how it would have to be so that we have at least some meaningful idea of what it is. Getting to an adequate or full description can be difficult to accomplish, not least of all because the objects of conscious have “horizons,” something that is clear in being unable to see all aspects of a vase at once, as we walk around it. The horizon structure of the external objects of consciousness requires ongoing description and interpretation whereas internal objects of consciousness (ideas) are given all at once. Apodicticity would seem to be possible only with internal objects of consciousness such as ideas, wishes, hopes, fears, etc., since I can only say for certain that what I am thinking is what I am thinking, a not very informative tautology. But there also seems to be horizons of the internal objects of consciousness. For example, how could my description of my love for someone ever be adequate or full?

People often take for granted that they know *what* is happening and go straightaway to determining *why* what is happening is happening or what to do about it. But I think that the true philosophical task is to see always more clearly what is happening as it happens without prejudice (insofar as that is possible at all), and, where many disagree, to see what is essentially true or consistent among all the various disagreements as a possible new starting place. Determining the essence of things (what a thing is or what is happening or what should be done) seems to me to be an endless task of responsive, hermeneutic questioning which approaches its descriptive goal without ever getting there. This going forward without closure is not for everyone. It is certainly peculiar to what I think of as the way of the seer.

Blending together with the first two 'movements' of the phenomenological 'method', then, the third movement of transitioning into and practicing philosophy from within the phenomenological attitude is the originary description of the intuited essences from within the constraints of the epochē, that is, from within a description-space that is free of bias and prejudice and preconceived ideas, presumptions, sedimented meanings, well-worn interpretations, etc. (Think of Descartes wanting to start all new and fresh from the very beginning of trying to figure things out, putting all previous knowledge out of play.) This is a task that must be taken up anew repeatedly. Phenomenology is the science of new beginnings, the science of starting anew, Husserl

said. It is no wonder, then, that numerous of his major works are subtitled “Introductions to Phenomenology.”

A final note on this so-called phenomenological ‘method’. It isn’t a method in the usual sense. It is a practice that is more like learning to play a musical instrument than following a lock-step procedure mechanically. Sure, there are some basics to learn, but after that the deployment of phenomenology is more like jazz improvisation on a theme than mechanically following a score (which still involves interpretation). Thus, I understand phenomenology to be a personal practice and an ethical way of life due to the necessity of striving to function from a prejudice-free consciousness, an orientation requiring personal moral growth and development. The phenomenological method is not an impersonal method that can be applied to reality at arm’s length in a supposedly objective, detached manner, like the Scientific Method. Rather, the practicing phenomenologist is both the investigator and, simultaneously and in good hermeneutic fashion, the ‘object’ investigated. There is not only one phenomenology. There can be infinite phenomenologies since we each live in a unique world that is both imminent and transcendent, and thus as many phenomenologies as there are phenomenologists, each revealing reality anew.

How Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology avoids solipsism and meaningful connection with the other is a question Husserl struggled with to the end and one which has continued under the rubric of “the problem of other minds” in the analytic tradition. Can

I know what it is like to be anyone other than myself? Can an essential connection with the other be possible or must the other always remain other? In the phenomenological tradition, one of Husserl's students, Emmanuel Levinas, came up with a solution to that very question which can be summed up in a three-word phrase: subjectivity is intersubjectivity. Levinas will strive to show that the problem of solipsism is overcome in and by the very nature of human subjectivity.

# 11.

## On Being Divine: Happiness and the Pleasure-Pain Continuum

From Epicurus to Jeremy Bentham, unabashed hedonists argue that pleasure is the *ultimate good* of life. Pleasure is thought to be that for the sake of which everything else is done. Do you agree with that? Is pleasure what motivates you? Can you do anything that doesn't fall along the pleasure/pain continuum? Getting clear about the question of pleasure will require some discernment.

One odd thing about pleasure, as I have all-too-often found out in practice, is that it is possible for pleasure to morph suddenly or slowly into its opposite: pain. A few beers are a pleasure. Not knowing when enough is enough and a few too many beers becomes a pain the next day. But if pleasure is so unstable that it can become pain in the blink of an eye, how can it be counted an ultimate and absolute good?

One thing seems certain, pleasure should be thought of as not standing alone, but as always occurring at some point along a pleasure-pain continuum, and always as happening somewhere, to someone, at a certain time, under certain circumstances, etc. No

two pleasures or pains are the same. When pursued to extremes the borders of pleasure and pain begin to blur and overlap oddly, as in sadism, masochism, alcoholism, drug-addiction, work-addiction, TV-addiction, sex addiction, etc., such that it is hard to distinguish one from the other at times. Does pleasure need pain in order to appear? Are they always linked? Are all pleasures a little painful? Must they be?

That pleasure only occurs along a continuum with pain is not the only limitation impacting our unimpeded enjoyment of it. I believe I pursue my pleasures freely, creating them as if out of nothing, while in fact, *in actual practice*, there is an overwhelming and invisible imposition of conventional control and structuring, vectors of influence, upon the body of my pleasure by the elite powerbrokers and creators of social norms and practices: big business (big money), big government (big regulations), big religion (big dogmas). The pleasures of solo sex are generally proscribed by world religions, for example, while the pleasures of what I call the “Myth of Romantic Love” (MORL) are extolled, since the sanctioned and restricted pleasures attached to MORL are consistent with the goals of the elite power brokers, whereas solo sex is not.

Being temporary, fading, and fleeting, the experience of pleasure requires recurrence and repetition for its sustenance and resuscitation—and which may be the very essence of pleasure itself, disrobed to the point of incalculable vibration, to

rubbing. *Pleasure would be the repetition of a welcomed instant of sensation vibrating indefinitely and arousing me passively at that chiasm where the visible and the invisible coalesce.* Although welcomed and desired, I can only take so much repetition of this pleasurable vibrating, yet it can be difficult to know when enough is enough, difficult to discern when indirectly produced pleasure becomes directly sought pleasure, for example, opening the door to possibilities of pain. What is the difference between these two?

Pleasure can be thought as having two modes of production. *Indirect pleasures*, which are not sought for their own sake, flow indirectly from action that aims at something other than the pleasure itself. At best, intention aims, not at the pleasure, but at the action of which pleasure is an inherent but secondary outcome, aiming at the action in itself and for itself. Unlike ingesting alcohol for the purpose of feeling good, for example, which would be an action done to directly produce pleasure, indirect pleasure is pleasure that is not directly sought but that occurs as the result of something else that is sought. *Directly produced pleasure*, on the other hand, is pleasure produced by an activity aimed directly at producing the pleasure for the sake of the pleasure itself, where the action that is necessary to accomplish that outcome is secondary and accidental. I decide to exercise by going for a walk. I find my walk to be pleasurable although I did not go for the walk *in order to* directly produce the pleasure, I went on the walk primarily for the exercise. Indirect pleasure is the unintended but welcomed

consequence of an activity that was undertaken to accomplish something other than the pleasure itself.

In reflecting on direct and indirect pleasure production, we come across an aspect of Aristotle's distinction between pleasure and happiness: pleasure is a passive *state* of my being while happiness is an *activity* of my being. To be happy is to be engaged in meaningful activity. The 'higher' and 'broader' the meaningfulness of the activity, the more perfect my happiness. To pursue happiness is to pursue an *activity* for its own sake, regardless of whether pleasure follows from this or not, although it likely would. Pleasure itself, on the other hand, is a *state* that we experience passively since it happens to us, we are subjected to it, it befalls us, is caused in us as a response to or consequence of the object of our pleasure impinging on our senses or our mind, and which comes upon us immediately and unbidden when we experience the object of our pleasure, either directly or indirectly. Thus, the least pleasure can become a passion.

Because of its accidental character, indirect pleasure is less dangerous, and thus preferable (for the philosopher and seeker of wisdom), than pleasure directly sought for its own sake from a certain activity or substance, which can lead one astray. The pursuit of meaningful activity produces indirect pleasure; but it is always a little risky, from an ultimate perspective, to seek pleasure directly from a certain activity and to engage in that activity solely for the purpose of the pleasure rather than for the sake of the

activity itself or the outcome of the activity. The reason for this is that, developmentally, according to Aristotle and the ancient Greeks generally, activity is preferable to passivity. I am never so much a mason as when I am in the act of building something with mortar and stone.

Thus, from Aristotle, we get something like this: *The best pleasure is pleasure that is the indirect and unintended result of focusing on the best activity we can undertake and which we undertake for its own sake while performing this activity to the best of our ability.* For Aristotle, the highest human activity we can engage in would be thinking, reflection, meditation, or contemplation, and the highest form of this activity would be when we are engaged in thinking about or contemplating the highest or most rarefied object, like the meaning of life or God or Immortality, rather than what I want for dinner. Amid this high-minded activity of intellectual arousal, when most turned-on to ideas, to the infusion of contemplation, to the infinity of possibilities and the possibility of the impossible and beyond ... then we would be most happy and would be most fulfilling our human destiny by exercising our highest function, the state of active intellectual arousal, according to Aristotle's formula and the pleasure that flowed from that activity would be the most perfect pleasure, the most complete and sustainable. We would be, in that intellectually aroused condition, as perfectly human as we could possibly be, still

in this world, perhaps, but already close to God, already close to being divine ourselves....

Because pleasure is a passive state—largely what I am experiencing when I am watching TV or listening to music or watching a baseball game—and because we are less our true self when we are in such a passive state than when we are actively engaged in meaningful activity, it is helpful to let go of direct pleasures as a goal in itself or as a way of focusing your life direction and desire, and, instead, look to engaging only in activities you desire wholly for their own sake, and not even for the justifiable indirect pleasures that flow from them. Have your measure of pleasure but don't lose your mind over it.

To the extent that drugs, food, alcohol, entertainment, sex, and other sources of passively rendered, directly sought pleasure can easily become self-reinforcing and addictive, they are dangerous for their capacity to delude us and lead us astray from the way of the seer. It would be better to pursue money for the sake of making money itself (*that* disorder) rather than pursuing money for the sake of producing pleasure or power or *anything* else. The same is true with lovers as objects of pleasure. Pursuing lovers whose company is not desirable for his or her own sake, but only for the sake of having sex or relieving boredom or dealing practically with the contingencies of life, or something else other than love, is a dangerous spiritual practice in my view, a reduction of the other to a useful object.

*Here is a developmental exercise: Focus on doing what you are doing right now for its own sake, that is, strictly for the intrinsic value of the action itself rather than for what it may produce by way of pleasure, utility, power, success, satisfaction, or anything else beyond itself, any outcome, anything beyond the simple perfection of the present moment. If you are unable to find that in your present action, then perhaps you should change your action until you do. Suppose you had to re-live this very moment over and over again Forever. How would that be for you?*

## 12.

# Social Constructivism, Moral Relativism, And Sexual Practice

The fact that the consciousness of sexuality in any age, reflected in the sexual fables we create, and which create us in turn ... the fact that our sexual consciousness is to a large degree shaped, constituted, or constructed by social, economic, religious, philosophical and other normative cultural influences, is undeniable. One need only look at the widespread differences in which sexual mores and practices are morally acceptable in some societies but not in others. Observing these differences in customarily acceptable sexual morality among societies, some argue that whatever a society *says* is right, *is* right. That is cultural relativism. When in Greece, do as the Greeks do. To a large extent, we all engage in such moral relativism...until we find it unpalatable.

Speaking of the Greeks, a good example of the relativity of sexual valuation in fifth century BC Athens is the phenomenon of pederasty, which was at least marginally morally and socially acceptable at the time, especially among the gentry. For the same behavior today in our society that was tolerated back in Greece, a

person would be sent to prison. Such social/moral relativism shows how it is possible for our ideas about certain practices to change, even though some nationalistic absolutists mistakenly believe that *our* practices are finally and undeniably the absolutely correct ones.

To ethically criticize a culturally relative practice (such as pederasty, child marriage, slavery, etc.) it would be necessary to find an absolute moral value that would apply to any and every society equally all the time. Other than the proverbial “Do no harm” principle, which entails situational interpretations rarely agreed upon by all (abortion and euthanasia, for example), and notwithstanding religious dogma and divine revelations that are beyond our experience, there is no absolute and universally agreed upon moral value, and thus no absolute and universally agreed upon basis for judging similar-but-different practices among various cultures. Because they are not governed by absolute rules, social practices can and do change, including our perception, understanding, and valuation of erotic consciousness and sexual practices.

Human sexual consciousness, sexual self-consciousness, and sexual practice go far beyond mere intercourse or any other narrowly defined, specific sexual act. Humans are *essentially* sexual. Reproductive capacity is the bare minimum, realism-oriented way of understanding what human sex is all about. Human sexuality is as broad as humanness is broad. Human

sexuality is not something that is merely added onto a sexless human being, nor can sex be removed from the very idea of a human being. Embodied human life is necessarily sexual. That thoroughgoingness of sex is perhaps what sets humans apart from most other life forms. What I am thinking about here is our deeper and much repressed consciousness of ourselves as thoroughgoing sexual beings, which is a much broader idea than the intercourse-centric view of sex, one which entails all aspects of human erotic experience, and which includes how we, as a society, think of, talk about, and deal with human sexual/erotic organs.

In France, for example, a woman's bare breasts appearing in an ad on public TV is no big deal. Here in the U.S., it is a big deal! The manner in which a society controls how female breasts are permitted or forbidden to be bared in public is part of the embedded social consciousness of sexuality for that society and managed by our tripartite cultural command center: big business, big government, big religion.

Consider another unusual sexual practice that is widespread in our society: ritualistic male [circumcision](#). A Greek of the 5th century BC would be appalled by the widespread practice in our society today of ritually mutilating the perfectly healthy penis of infant boys by surgically removing the prepuce (foreskin) of healthy young male babies when there is no medical or hygienic justification for such permanently scarring, ritual mutilation. Circumcision thus became a hot issue when the nascent Christians

came to Greece seeking converts, requiring the first general Council of the new church to resolve the question of uncircumcised Greeks becoming Christians (who were mostly Jews). After a lot of discussion, the leaders of the new Christian religion decided that Greek converts did not have to cut off part of their penis in order to become a Christian, sending a sigh of relief resounding through the Parthenon.

Unnecessary, ritual male circumcision performed routinely today on infant boys, scarring them for life, is clearly mutilation that constitutes a most egregious form of child sexual assault which is, incredibly, tolerated in our society today, being yet another misandrist attack on the male body, intending to subdue and civilize it. The foreskin is a complex, integral part of the penis and the male body, important for producing subtle erotic pleasure and who knows what else. If God or Nature didn't want it to be there, it wouldn't be there. Non-medical circumcision is nothing else than an act of pure, brutal, sadistic, ritual mutilation of the healthy penis for no good reason, hearkening back to that strange pact Abraham forged with the God he hallucinated while on a vision quest out in the desert ages ago. I'm not sure, but I would not be surprised if infant circumcision was considered a crime in ancient Greece. It most certainly should be seen for the vicious crime it is today!

Ritual male circumcision is a socially tolerated ritual sexual practice in our society that is the result of the combined influence of religious, economic, political, historical, and other forces, just as

was the case with slavery. Does that make it right? No, it does not. The widespread attitude in our society today of passively accepting the practice of mutilating the penis of healthy young male babies (or mutilating *any* healthy human genitalia, male or female) without medical justification is a socially constructed attitude that can and should change.

Hopefully, when our society becomes more ethically enlightened, ritual male circumcision will be seen for the horrific sexual assault that it is and will be outlawed, along with murdering the unborn—just as we have outlawed sex between adults and minors, stoning women for adultery, lynching, etc.

It is time to change some of our current sexual values and practices, especially as these are guided by the misleading and deadly attraction of the Myth of Romantic Love (MORL) leading the unsuspecting moths into the flame of the high-risk relationship called marriage governed by the big three conventional consciousness creators.

## Love Letters

They are bodies I can touch.  
My pen extends my hand  
Into a body of space  
That separates and joins.  
A body, too, within your words,  
Between the salutation  
And the fare-thee-well.  
Paper bodies, yes  
But they smell like you  
Of distances not crossed  
Even in a postal caress.  
I hold your letters to my lips,  
Flesh somehow of your flesh,  
Flesh so silky fine it becomes  
Immortal in my hands.  
Stretched to breaking,  
Precious bodies carried forth  
By vans and sorters,  
Airplanes, jeeps, hands  
Of the postman  
At your mailbox,  
Your hands tearing open  
The seal of my ill-kept secret.

# 13.

## Notes on Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*

On the origin of the Sovereign Individual

### Section 1

Friedrich Nietzsche begins his analysis of the origin of moral responsibility in Sections I-V of Essay 2 in *The Genealogy of Morals* focusing on the notion of forgetfulness. Forgetfulness works in opposition to the ability to make promises, Nietzsche asserts. Forgetfulness is not merely a kind of passive inertia ("*vis inertiae*"), a mere resistance to moving memory to recall. Rather, forgetfulness is an active power that keeps certain experiences from entering our consciousness, just as in the process of digestion we don't merely passively absorb *everything* into our system.

Forgetfulness is thus a positive power in the sense that it keeps us from being overwhelmed by all that is happening to us. If we are in the midst of an ongoing problem with our significant other, for example, it is helpful to be able to forget that trouble when we must focus on studying our philosophy or on following a recipe to make a cake. Otherwise, actively remembering the problem would interfere with our ability to get our work done.

Thus, without forgetfulness, Nietzsche claims, we would not be able to *be focused and present* to anyone or anything. If we can't *forget* the cares of our day, we will have difficulty focusing on what is happening at work or in school. To be unable to forget is like being unable to digest, Nietzsche claims, in yet another pregnant metaphor taken from the realm of sensuous lived life.

But human beings have also developed memory in opposition to the *positive* power of forgetfulness. Memory keeps forgetfulness in check, which is necessary to do if we are going to make promises and not forget them. Memory is an active power of not letting something be forgotten, and not merely the passive indigestion of something we are unable to forget. Memory is an active power that can keep a promise in mind even though other events intervene between the time the promise was made and the time it is carried out. Thus, Nietzsche refers to this power as "*an actual memory of the will*" (115d). And insofar as memory is always oriented toward the future, most importantly toward the future keeping of a promise, it is a power to *regulate* the future.

But who is capable of thus regulating the future? According to Nietzsche, only the person who can distinguish between what is necessary and what is merely accidental, that is, what truly *needs* to be done and what doesn't need to be done; a person who can think according to cause and effect, who has foresight, who knows exactly what he or she wants and who also has the power to get it; a person who knows how to calculate his or her moves in advance,

like knowing how to get to be CEO of a corporation, or being able to figure out what a teacher is going to put on a test—this ability to calculate your moves in advance is perhaps the most important of all the qualities of the person who would make promises. The person capable of making promises, who has taken their life in their hands and determined or calculated who they will be at some point in the future and has been able to see this in advance. This is the person who has control over their life, the person who is capable of guaranteeing himself or herself a future, of designing it and knowing how to bring it about (116a).

## Section 2

The ability to make promises and keep them is responsibility, an ability which has developed only after a long period of customary morality. Customary morality is the morality of the herd. Here individuals do not themselves calculate but are calculable and predictable; they go along with the customs and norms of the times; they do not think for themselves. Thus, Nietzsche argues that autonomy and (customary) morality (all 'morality' is *customary* for Nietzsche) are mutually exclusive.

The autonomous person who breaks free of the herd, who breaks free of the predictable uniformity of the masses (“the masses” are people who go along with conventional customs and norms thoughtlessly); the person who breaks free of customary morality and creates their own morality through their personal competency to make promises and keep them ... this person has

risen above the common morality and is “supermoral” or a “sovereign individual, someone who resembles only himself, for whom there is no adequate measure other than himself ... in short, the man of the personal, long, and independent will” (116b). This is the noble, and thus free individual. He is superior to all (lesser animals) who are unable to bind themselves by promising.

The person who is competent to promise has gained freedom in the sense of having power over their life, power to control the circumstances around them, power even over nature. Because she is free from the influence of cultural values (values proffered by TV and popular culture and vigorously promoted by the big three powerbrokers of customary morality—big business, big government, and big religion), the responsible person makes her decisions based on her own free will as her “standard of value” (116c). She honors others who are like herself, who know they are superior because they make promises only rarely, with caution and good judgement and somewhat reticently, and thus who disdains those who make promises at the drop of a hat and who break them as easily with a glib “I’m sorry” that rolls off their lips with the same ease as the meaningless promise. For these “lean and empty jackasses” the noble and free person “will have the heel of his foot ready.”

The “privilege” of being this kind of proud person, this *responsible* person, becomes second nature (i.e., habitual) to this person, like an “instinct.” This instinct that is the result of being a

responsible person (i.e., a noble person, superior person, self-controlled person, in-charge-of-one's-future person, disinterested, dispassionate, not swayed by mere emotion but moved by a deep feeling of self-confidence and mastery over oneself and one's world, beyond the reach of fate, answerable to no one...), this core instinct of such a person is called *conscience* (116d).

### Section 3

The conscience of the noble person has taken a long time to form, Nietzsche argues. It is a strange thing, uncommon. Conscience is the ability to "guarantee oneself with all due pride, and also at the same time to say *yes* to oneself..." i.e., to be *competent* to promise with self-assurance, which is the power of memory. In pre-historic times people did not make promises. Even now, young people need to be taught to make and keep promises. This is the same as saying that one must develop memory.

The development of memory was historically thought to need a painful experience in order to make what was supposed to be remembered stick: "only that which never stops hurting remains in his memory" (117a). Mnemonics, a system of remembering which associates the thing to be remembered with a negative experience that is not easily forgotten (the tedium of endless repetition, for example) was the old-school approach. Perhaps negative things even today are a reminder of this old approach to remembering. The heaviness of the past is remembered in all "seriousness." Perhaps all forms of horror and

cruelty can be traced to this demand to remember, the way punishment associates pain with transgression so as not to forget. Perhaps this is what asceticism is all about, like yoga and transcendental meditation, Nietzsche muses, a process of using difficult methods to keep in mind certain ideas while forgetting others. Here Nietzsche seems to be talking about memory as a collective phenomenon of mankind and not just individual memories which reflect the collective.

#### Section 4

The collective memory power of a people, their relative place on the scale of nobility, could be determined by how memory and forgetfulness were manifested in their culture. Strict penal laws indicate a low power of memory; a person's word in this culture isn't worth a plugged nickel. Here Nietzsche is criticizing the Germany of his time for being irresponsible, commoners lacking nobility and sovereignty.

The Germans had a hard time breeding themselves a memory, Nietzsche argues, breeding a conscience, the competency of responsibility, as is evidenced by the severe means they use to help themselves learn to remember, i.e., be responsible before the law. Nietzsche seems to be saying here that society is built on the power of memory, the power or competency of promising, i.e., responsibility or nobility, the way of the truly autonomous person. The ability to remember allows us not only to make promises but also to attain reason; for without memory we could not reason.

Alas, developing memory is painful, like developing a conscience, the consciousness of sin. The development of the consciousness of sin, bad conscience, seems to be a stage along the way toward the development of responsibility, or an aberration of this process.

## Section 5

How did bad conscience, the consciousness of sin, come into the world? The genealogists of morals are no help (those who wish to show the origin of ethics or moral responsibility in transcendental values) because they are only focused on what is happening at present and have no sense of the past, no memory of the past, no 'second sight' (which is what is required for an understanding of ethics). These don't know the truth; they are moral philosophers caught up in the herd mentality of forgetfulness.

The 'ought' of morality is derived, not from some otherworldly God or abstract first principle, but from the concrete and naturalistic idea of *owing* someone something. Punishment is developed out of retaliation, a systematized form of retaliation (equal to the crime), and not out of some abstract notion of freedom. In the same way, Nietzsche sees that memory or responsibility is not something commanded from on high, but which is the result of a natural process. Nietzsche was against any form of extrinsic, transcendental authority if it interfered with the self-assertion of the natural sovereign individual, whether this interference came in the form of a vengeful God, the threat of karma, cultural values, or any other form of authoritarian

suppression of the sovereign individual's exercise of personal moral power, which would try to diminish the ultimate value of the free or noble (responsible) individual. *The highest value is to get beyond all values to where the individual is the creator of his or her own values through the competency of making promises.* This is the transvaluation or revaluation of all values, a kind of taking your life in your own hands and abiding by only the rules you establish for yourself, while avoiding the short-sighted interference of lesser mortals still in thrall to conventional morality. The Sovereign Self is above the law because she is the origin and creator of law. When we can make and keep promises, we do not need the law. The word of noble individuals is their bond. End of story.

The *idea* that we could have acted otherwise when we did something wrong based on an abstract idea of freedom is a later development than the infliction of punishment as an 'animal' demand for retaliation or revenge against the wrongdoer. The abstract idea of justice was not prior to the sheer instinct for retaliation that has become suppressed for the individual, sublimated, and systematized as punishment in society. We did not first have some abstract concept of justice or responsibility by which offenders were judged. Punishment was sought in the same spirit in which children are punished, out of anger for doing some felt injury that pissed-off the adult. Punishing the child gets the angry adult back to moral homeostasis. This immediate demand for retaliation is modified and kept in bounds by the knowledge

that the injury can be somewhat rectified or brought back into balance by extracting a price from the perpetrator, even if this is only in the form of inflicting pain.

The idea of exacting pain to balance off an injury goes back to the most fundamental rule of barter, Nietzsche claims: you get what you pay for, and you must pay for what you get. To cause an injury is to take something from someone (from a 'creditor'), and to pay for something is always a kind of pain (the price which must be paid by the debtor), what is owed. Even though I owe the money, it is always a bit painful to pay my bills and taxes. The development of ethics, Nietzsche claims, goes back to the basic forms of barter and exchange that evolved for doing business. Yet business is rife with fraud because the predominant ethic is to make as much money as possible without getting caught. Not much nobility to be found there.

## Section 6

This last section of the reflection on the origin of the Sovereign Individual is a bit perplexing. What Nietzsche seems to be saying in this section is that revenge is okay and that it is revenge that is at the heart of justice in its crude beginnings. Justice, here is thought to be produced as the feeling of satisfaction that I have when I can hurt someone in return, proportionately, hurt the *body* of the person who has injured me proportionately to how they have hurt me. We do that in a small way when we ignore or shun someone as a form of social punishment for some reason. We

intend for them to feel the pain of social exile to the same measure as we feel they have injured us. Nietzsche claims that it is right and natural (even if a bit barbaric) to take pleasure in this retribution. It feels good to get even, to harm someone who has harmed you. It balances things out. And that coming back into balance feels good. Victims cheer in court when a judgment of punishment is rendered against the perpetrator of a crime against them. Yet the whole context of this passage is that the *equivalency* between injury and pain—how this is worked out so meticulously according to the principle of getting *even*, down to the value of cutting off various bodily parts of the debtor to pay for the debt, reminiscent of insurance companies' actuarial monetary valuation of lost limbs or body parts—is a crude form of justice for which we naturally feel repugnance today (119a). Nevertheless, this is how the collective competency of promising had to develop. Spare the rod.... It is worth considering whether Nietzsche is advocating this approach to justice here or condemning it or merely seeing it as an historical phase in the development of culture. Or is he just saying that this is how the collective competency of memory did, in fact, develop, through these crude, painful forms of justice born from taking pleasure in the infliction of pain on another person?

The first line of the next section in the text might be helpful: "It is in the sphere of contracts and legal obligations that the moral universe of guilt, conscience, and duty, ('sacred' duty) took its inception. Those beginnings were liberally sprinkled with blood,

as are the beginnings of everything great on earth...." Clearly, Nietzsche thinks that although these beginnings of justice were bloody, that is what justice is all about. The application of justice is not derived from some abstract, universal idea of justice. Nietzsche is a pragmatic existentialist in this regard and his social Darwinism is on display. Ethics arose from the simple necessities of good business, the necessities of trade where man first felt pride in his accomplishments:

“The mind of early man was preoccupied to such an extent with price-making, assessment of values, the devising and exchange of equivalents, that, in a certain sense, this may be said to have constituted his thinking. Here we find the oldest variety of human acuteness, as well as the first indication of human pride, of a superiority over other animals. Perhaps our word *man* (*manas*) still expresses something of that pride: man saw himself as the being that measures values, the "assaying" animal. Purchase and sale, together with their psychological trappings, antedate even the rudiments of social organization and covenants.”

# 14.

## Freedom and Renunciation: Prisoners and Monks

Sometimes I feel like Rousseau's noble savage—born free, innocent, and full of possibility but corrupted by an arbitrary, hierarchical, controlling social order with its unnecessary constraints upon my liberty, especially my sexual liberty, constraints enacted ultimately by the worldly trinity of self-serving, elitist power groups and their minions: big religion; big government; big business. Following Nietzsche, my moral work has been to not desire what these power groups have to offer, in keeping with ancient wisdom, as if resisting the golden calf. Who needs a cup when one has two good hands? O Diogenes, you cynical, pagan monk! Who could be more attuned to the natural than you? Social science has debunked Nietzsche's idea of the Sovereign Individual. After Stanley Milgram's Obedience Experiment, Phil Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment, and Darley and Batson's Good Samaritan Experiment, as well as many others, it is clear that we are constantly barraged and influenced by a virtual host of situational factors that are beyond our control and

of which we are largely, if not completely, unaware, situational factors exploited by the power brokers of society to get us to do their bidding to support their prosperity.

Regarding erotic love relationships, for example, monogamous marriage as practiced in our society within the general framework of the Myth of Romantic Love (MORL), does not seem wholesome as a foundation for an authentic relationship. This symbolic binding and guiding of the erotic/romantic consciousness of the masses into the contemporary forms of monogamous marriage, for which the survival rate is less than fifty percent, is the surrender of relational control, home, and family life to the state hierarchy, the church hierarchy, and big business hierarchies—power groups that have a keen interest in controlling and determining the collective life of erotic energy and desire in order to bolster the elite superiority of the power groups.

Whatever else it might be, monogamy requires a giving over of my freedom as a man to the control of a woman. Surely, the arbitrary constraints of monogamous marriage and the very idea of “monogamy” itself is the creation of the Woman and not of the Man. It is Woman who is the lover of stable society. Why would a man ever desire to be linked exclusively to one female were this not required? The promise of regular sex and patrilineal descent is insufficient compensation, as if Eros cared for these meaningless things. As if empire or dynasty or family were important to the

course of the erotic. Nietzsche's desire to marry and possess Lou Salome revealed the chink in his philosophical armor, his downfall, his lack of freedom and moral sovereignty. He was young, she was considerably younger. He was not seeing clearly. Did he ever? Did he finally? She never did, segueing through the manipulation of various men into the solitary aging narcissist. Or is madness the *inevitable and necessary* outcome of freedom-loving and seeing-clearly?

Like Socrates, what I value most is leisure time. Is this not to say that what I love the most is my freedom, my autonomy, as far as that is possible, to think about what I want whenever I want? I would forego much of what society has to offer for the freedom of that leisure. What ever happened to the freedom-loving Baby Boomers, the Taoist hippies who talked the talk back in the day? Co-opted by their own greed, insecurity, and fear, they have become lawyers and bankers and capitalist landowners and now wealthy retirees kicking back in the easy chair of moral conventionalism, celebrating at the top of the heap, the few building success on the backs of the masses of sleepwalkers in the matrix of conventionality. Hippies who did not make the transition to genuine Taoist simplicity and detachment. Dennis Hopper, once an 'easy rider' now playing golf at an exclusive course every day. The road to perdition is not the way of the seer. Wanting to be successful in the world and wanting to see clearly are antipodes. You cannot serve two masters and serve them both well.

How am I still connected to the social order by desire? How free do I want to be? How clearly do I want to see?

It is never possible to be entirely free of the social order, of course. Even Diogenes apparently slept in a drainage pipe produced by some craftsman, a social construction, even if it was out on the edge of town. Insanity would be being the freest we can be while still being to some degree “me.” Perpetual self-annihilation without dying. The first and final connection is language. We are linguistic beings through and through.

Monasticism is chosen imprisonment. Prisons were initially modeled on the monastic *ordo*. This habitual ordering—complete with cell, bible, and rule of silence—was meant to reform the prisoner. We should go back to that. Monasticism is a rejection of the social order in favor of freedom to reform the soul in the light of God’s pure grace. The virtue of monastic stability is a rejection of material goods; it is renunciation of the world, thus accomplishing the freedom of time at your disposal. Renunciation produces freedom. Detachment is the beating heart of seeing.

Want to save money? Learn from the stability of monks and prisoners: stop moving around. Stop moving entirely. Want to have more leisure time at your disposal? Stop desiring things. To model prisons on monasteries was to forcibly teach prisoners how to accommodate themselves to the rejection and loss of the social order so that their souls might be made clean and fit for the Kingdom of Heaven. Stability is the threshold of Forever.

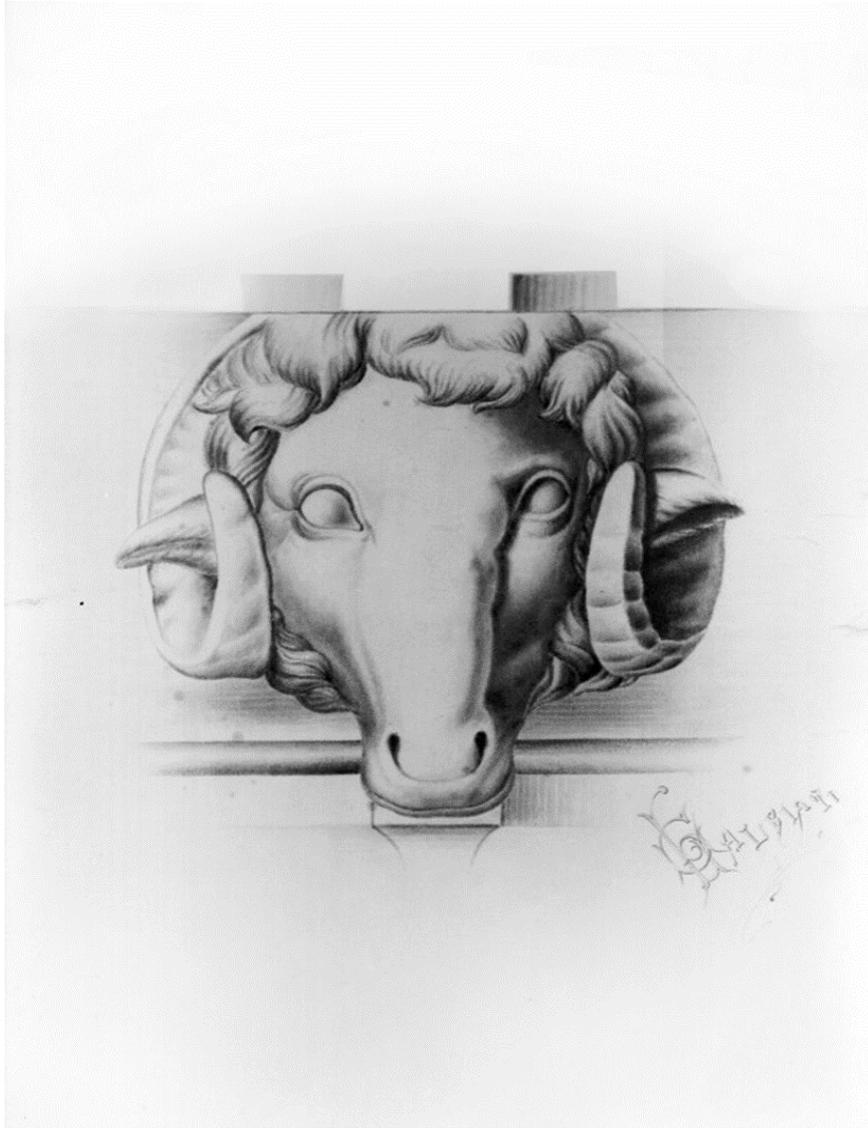
The monastic rule of silence is *prima facie* a rejection of language, the rejection of our most fundamental connection to the social order, to the social world, the world of others. Perhaps this renunciation of the world is the initial impulse of the succinct aphorism and the sparse use of language by the sage, and the monastic rule of silence itself. Best to speak without words. Wisdom loves an aphorism, Nietzsche claims. Love and wonder can render us speechless.

The way of philosophy is not for everyone. Similarly, the genuine friends of Jesus are few, the ones who would go to the wall, following the Master. Christendom, as opposed to Christianity, is for the many, like Facebook or Twitter. The true way of Jesus is through the narrow door of renunciation, forgiveness, love for others. Not for the many or the rich. You must give away all that you own and let go of whatever you call 'mine' including vengeance, resentment, self-interest, pride, anger, and hatred. You must, in a sense, give up your life for the good of others, right now, this very minute. Many are called but few choose that way of the seer in its essentials. Few have developed sufficient memory to choose that way. And no one can do it on their own.

Neither Roman Catholic Christendom or contemporary Protestantism, in all its derivative, hierarchical forms, its statutes and doctrines, is the way of Jesus, as I understand it, as I see and interpret my Brother's words and His teaching, as He speaks to me. The true and most radical way of Jesus could never have been

a way for the masses, as one might nevertheless desire, without becoming a duping of the masses (as was the idea of Christendom), any more than the way of philosophy could be a way for the many.

It is an unrealistic and impossible ideal that *all* should be saved. Yet, hope blossoms eternally.



*Drawing by my grandfather, Luigi Galbiati*

*III.*

*EMBRACING THE PRESENT*

## 15. Earthlings

We are not *on* the Earth in the same way that my cup is *on* the desk. The difference is that my cup and my desk can be understood meaningfully apart from one another, thus making it possible for their separate and distinct surfaces to achieve spatial contiguity such that one is truly capable of being upon or on the other. If there were no separation between cup and table, then there would be no possibility for such a 'being-on'. The signification of that word "on" is not the same for me and the Earth as it is for the cup and the table.

I am not comprehensible apart from earth any more than "daughter" is comprehensible apart from the idea of "father" and "mother." I could not get separate enough from Earth to be *placed* upon it since I am *of the earth*. I am mobile, thinking and speaking earth. The idea that we are "on" the earth is misleading metaphysical language leftover from the imposition of Christian creation myths and later reinforced by Cartesian dualism where Earth is other, even if those myths from the religious tradition do at least agree that we are "*made out of*" the earth. What "earth" is and whether and how it can be comprehended, we must consider further. This much is clear: we are not so much *on* the earth as we

are *of* the earth. Like all other residents of the blue/green planet, we humans are *earthlings*. What is the significance of this elemental and unbreakable bond?

Being of the earth, knowing that I belong here and am at home here, means that I know that earth is sacred, as sacred and precious as I am in my simple being, and that I will be taken care of by the sacred earth of which I am a part—like the proverbial lilies of the valley and the birds of the air—because I am of the earth, and earth is not merely one heavenly body among many such bodies because Earth is my home. That does not mean that I will automatically live Forever or that everything will always be provided for me without me having to do *anything*. Even the birds of the air must feather their nests; even the lilies must stretch toward the sun. But that doing is not daily toil, not a drudge. It is joy in being alive! The joy of being connected to the great fabric of Life, the living cosmos, just to be a momentary part of all this.

You cannot own the earth. In truth, there is nothing that I can own since I cannot, properly speaking, even own myself—a ridiculous metaphysical, Lockean notion purporting to be enlightened thinking. Private property is a false, bedeviling, and confused notion, perhaps the very root of all evil, perhaps the very source of all degeneration, as Rousseau seemed to know—and then forgot. I must cooperate with the earth since that is to respect myself, since I am myself earth. Respecting the earth means seeking justice free of self-interest, for the earth is just in its unity

and steadfastness, but the human can go astray. It is I who must learn and re-learn to say “Yes!” to life.

What is earth? It is not just this rocky orb called a “planet” that we have re-cognized and re-duced to a utilitarian, objective structure of extended stuff; a sphere tumbling blindly in the void; a concept alien and detached from the human; something that is very other. Earth is more than that. Animism, that first response to the appearance of earth to self-consciousness, saw that earth is as alive as I am and as incomprehensible. Earth, like God and Forever, is always more than whatever we think it is.

Earth is the wholly Given or, better, it is the Giver *and* the Giving *and* the Gift, *par excellence*, since, without earth (if that can be thought at all) there is nothing, no-thing-ness. Earth is the giving of the gift beyond measure and comprehension. The Unconditioned giver is the Sublime which we can approach through *thinking* but which we cannot *know* because there is no higher category of understanding by which it can be subsumed and conceptualized. We live in the immanence of the sublime. The Infinite, the Bountiful, the Unconditioned...though immanent in their ideation, these conceptual frames nevertheless remain always other, transcendent to reductionist language. Earth is not the same as the idea of God with human limits taken limitlessly—especially when we mistakenly believe that we can conceive of such a thing since only the poetic heart can know Forever. Nor is Earth equivalent to the concept of Nature. At its most innermost, earth is

being held in the arms of Life itself, nurtured, and loved no matter what. Earth is truly the Mother of all beings, nourished by Sky, the Giver of all gifts. Earth is the manifestation of our ultimate ground, which is the Sacred.

Because I know immediately that I am of the earth, even before I know it, there is nothing to fear in this place, no harm that could come to me in this passing realm of beautiful shadows, slow or fast, always short. Terror in the present instant or terror of the beyond can gain no hold, unless I invite it in, for there is no room for it in being-at-home. Instead, enjoyment becomes the air I breathe. Simple as that. Here, on the earth in a joyful way that only I can be on the earth, I am always already at-home!

## Eternal Return

Ghostly deer  
Crossing the yard  
All a-jitter with angst  
And fearful regard.

Like hesitant skeptics  
Driven and drawn  
To some new beginning  
Birthed out of the dawn.

They freeze in assembly  
Stopping to stare  
At nothing and no one  
Meeting them there.

Foggy brown phantoms  
From some other sphere  
Gathering now  
But then disappear.

Skittering spirits  
Making their way  
Up from the ravine  
Where discarded thoughts lay

Like bleach-whitened bones  
In a tangled old burn  
Patiently awaiting  
Their eternal return.

## III-16. The Easy Principle

*“For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

Matthew 11:28-30

I am a proponent of the easy way of life based on what I think of as the easy principle. The easy principle is simple and easy. Here it is. *“Life is Easy so Take it Easy.”* Life is easy to understand. Life is easy to remember, easy to practice. Life is not difficult or complicated, although we complicators and complexifiers can easily make it seem so. Yet the easy will always win out against the hard, the way water will always win out against stone.

The meaning of life—to the degree that this obscure and abstruse formulation makes sense at all—is not esoteric or complex or hard to understand. Life is easy and straightforward and does not hide, if we let it. Life gives itself straight off. Life is simple, available to everyone. Breathe in, breathe out. There you go! It is we who complexify life and make it difficult and uneasy. It is we who get it all mixed up and backward, confusing ourselves in

the process of making life difficult instead of accepting how easy it can be, how easy it is.

All knowledge is easy and simple. Those who speak what cannot be understood do not have knowledge because what they say is not easy to understand since they cannot make it so, as they should, if they truly knew. Ignorance always comes back to the teacher, the way unruly dogs are the fault of their owners.

Truth is always easy to understand, speaking straight, as an arrow flies easily to the target. Those who are ignorant of the easy way cover over their ignorance with obscure jargon and complex, mystifying formulations, trying to produce the impression that they know, wanting to appear better than others, smarter than others, more clever, more powerful. Thus, they make the easy difficult and cause others to feel un-easy and inept in the process.

Relating to others is easy. When it is not easy and is uneasiness-producing, then it is telling us to turn back and find the easy way. What is easy is easily accessible to everyone. The easy is easily apparent because it gives without holding back, without resistance. So, "Take it easy!" is well said. The easy is 'free and easy', democratic, comfortable, happening as if on its own, available without stress or strain. Seeing what is happening is easy, for example, yet can easily be a difficult practice because we think it must be hard to accomplish. Controlling anger is easy, yet because we are easily attached to our anger, we make control hard to accomplish. It is easy to be mistaken.

Life is like breathing. Breathing is easy. Doing what you are doing is always easy. Being comfortable with what is happening is easy. Knowing when enough is enough is easy. Easy means without stress or struggle or anxiety, without having to fight for it; not being withheld; given and giving; open, available, and transparent. The way water flows easily to where it belongs, where it most easily fits in and easily finds itself. The way flowers bloom easily. The easy way genuine conversation happens. The way smiling makes us feel better easily. Is this hard? We are easily fooled.

Wisdom is simple, easy, and apparent. Ignorance is complex, difficult, and obscure. The easy way is the sure path. It is the most comfortable and relaxing. The smile is the sign of the easy way. The un-furrowed brow. The calm voice. The relaxed body. The joyful spirit. The simple pleasures available to all, sunshine, starshine, wind on your face ... all are easy. Having plenty of time. The restfulness of sleep. Putting one foot in front of the other. Sitting in your easy chair. The joy of a good meal. Family. Friends. Lovers. Pets. All these are easy.

Everyone says: "Take it easy!" But few really practice this easy way. We think the easy is difficult to obtain, and thus fail to realize that it only seems that way because we have easily made it seem so. That we must work hard to obtain what is easy is our own foolishness. As if difficulty and suffering were the signs of correctness needed for acceptance. As if pain and struggle were

required. This is wrong thinking. It is too hard to comprehend and puts off the easy. Swimming against the current is hard; going with the flow is easy. Always wanting more is difficult; letting go is easy. Love is easy. Hatred is hard.

The easy way is always available. It is always clear when we have lost the easy way. Then we strive and contend and are dissatisfied and our life is hard. We become anxious and uncomfortable in our skin. Our body does not smile. These are signs that we must look for the easy way out, which is only hard to do if we make it so.

Stop trying so hard. Take it easy!

# 17.

## An Exhilaration Of Mind and Body

He was racing down the bike path in his wheelchair at breakneck speed. His long, muscular arms pumped furiously at the flashing steel rims of his chair with a pounding rhythm. Fifteen or so yards behind him, a muscular young man in jogging shorts was straining to catch the speeding wheelchair-man.

I had a front row seat for the contest, parked in my car on the cobblestone pad surrounding the Arch of Freedom at Valley Forge National Park. It was a warm, sunny day in late July.

At the bottom of the hill, the runner made a last surge at the speeding wheelchair-man but was unable to catch him. Breathing heavily, he turned off the path. The man and his machine had won!

The spokes of the wheelchair fractured the mid-afternoon sunlight as the piston-like arms of the wheelchair-man pumped himself up the incline, first both hands together, then alternating in a kind of jogging two-step, as if celebrating his victory. I was moved by the spectacle, fascinated.

The night before I had watched Jon Voight depict a veteran back from Vietnam and confined to a wheelchair in the movie "Coming Home" as he proceeded to seduce Jane Fonda. Not bad

work for a guy whose legs had been blown to smithereens. I started the car. Someone should congratulate him, I thought. Somebody ought to say that they saw it and that it was great! I put the car in gear.

The bike path follows the road up the incline and then it makes a Ninety-degree right turn toward the picnic area, following the road until that point. I passed the wheelchair-man in this stretch. Sweat was gleaming on his red, freckled face. He had long hair the color of straw, like Voight's, and a full beard to match. He had broad shoulders and a powerful chest. But his arms were extraordinary. They were massive, sinewy appendages, the kind of arms that once rowed across oceans, arms attached to an athletic eight-footer. They pumped with grace, knowledge, and power. A smile came to my face as I passed him. For a moment, our eyes met. He was smiling also.

I parked my car in the picnic area lot. The wheelchair-man was within twenty yards of a right-turn/left-turn combination that took the path away from the road when I stepped onto the narrow macadam strip, crossed it, and started jogging on a diagonal through the picnic tables, knowing that his need to keep to the path would force him to hug the perimeter. I ran easily, lightly. I was wearing my "Pumping Iron" T-shirt from Harry's Gym, with the torn hem of one of the narrow sleeves flapping out wildly, sneakers without socks, jeans. I felt a little crazy, lightheaded.

I got to the bend where the path turned away from the picnic area ten yards ahead of him. I could hear him coming but I

consciously refrained from turning my head to look. I crossed the track a little ahead of the left-hand turn, crossed it again and headed out into a great, rising field of Indian Grass and wildflowers—Buttercups, Daisies, Wild Iris, Bachelor Buttons—and continued on a diagonal direction across the field toward that point where we would meet, me through the Indian Grass and wildflowers, him keeping to the path.

I felt exhilarated. I was experiencing an intense and passionate sense of camaraderie with this stranger in the wheelchair, caught up in a kind of dance which I somehow knew surprised and pleased us both in the moment. It was unexpected, spontaneous, carefree. It carried us along. We were racing, no doubt about that. But it was a race motivated by the play of mutual respect rather than by a compulsive need to determine a winner and a loser. We are all winners, all losers. Nevertheless, I wondered if I would have the wind to get up the long hill before him.

I did, thinking that the strong should not limp before the lame. I was hanging on a sign which directed you to follow a certain route to General somebody-or-other's encampment, breathing hard, cursing myself for every cigarette I ever smoked and would smoke, when he came over the crest of the hill not twenty yards away, pumping that machine of his for all it was worth.

From a head-on perspective, pounding up the hill as he was, man and machine seemed to merge into a single entity: "*The Wheelchairman.*" He might have been some antediluvian creature

passing in and out of the dappled shadows cast by the ripe, July trees. A contemporary reminder of our ancient, mysterious, indomitable capacity for adaptation. I may be getting here second, he seemed to be saying, but I'm getting here! And he was. In powerful thrusts and bounds, neck muscles gripped and swelling, until finally he whizzed by me and turned a few circles in the gravel, never stopping.

"You look real good on that thing." I said. He smiled. "Man, you really know how to make it go." He laughed then and spun back on two wheels. Hi-ho-Silver!

I said, "I saw you beat that guy down there. It was great." He gave me his half-laugh again and said, "I got one more lap to go before I get out of here." We stayed there for a moment, panting and grinning.

At the entrance to the woods, as I was departing along the walking path, I turned around. *The Wheelchairman* had started pumping his way up the hill. "See you!" I called.

He spun his chair around without losing a beat and said, "Sometimes I even like to go up backwards," which he had proceeded to do. He was wearing a white T-shirt with two words emblazoned on the front in large, red letters: MEAN MACHINE.

*The Wheelchairman*. He moves in his own solar system, I thought, recalling Nietzsche's judgment of Heraclitus. He inspires me to find the limit of my own good arms, my own good legs, my own good heart.

# 18

## Sexual Practice East and West

*“Sexual energy is one of the most abundant gifts given to us by nature, yet most people casually toss it away without realizing the full value of its treasure.”*

Mantak Chia

### **Augustinian Sexuality**

Sexual consciousness in the West since the 5<sup>th</sup> century has been heavily influenced by Augustine of Hippo’s idea of original sin and the concupiscence which, he believed, follows from it.

Original sin is the idea that a pristine and innocent human nature was corrupted when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Paradise and ate the forbidden fruit, as depicted in the Old Testament story in *Genesis*. Now conscious of good and evil, according to Augustine’s account, they noticed their nakedness and were ashamed. They succumbed to sexual lust because they were no longer able to control their desire for sexual gratification since they had lost their original perfections, including immortality, and were now subject to lustful concupiscence.

Concupiscence is the vulnerability of the descendants of Adam and Eve to feel helplessly pulled or inclined toward deviancy and sin, especially sexual sins. Sin, most simply understood, is separation from God. Augustine tells us that he, himself, was torn by a concupiscence which he could not control rationally and willfully in his younger days. He felt driven by lust, as he describes in his mid-life spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*. But I don't think concupiscence was the cause of his overwhelming and obsessive sexual desires. He was a man of flesh and blood and his persistent struggles with sex, insofar as they were over and beyond the norm for a young man his age, were more likely the psychological result of adverse conditioning from his parents and his dysfunctional family experience than the fantasized and projected outcome of Eve's falling for the temptation of the evil serpent. And there certainly was dysfunction in Augustine's family or origin.

Before his famous conversion that would lead to him becoming Bishop of Hippo, Augustine describes himself as a slave to sensuality and lust. He couldn't understand why he was unable to control his sexual reactions. He couldn't stop thinking about sex. Being a little obsessive about sex is normal for a male adolescent during puberty, certainly not unusual, even if it becomes somewhat obsessive. For Augustine, however, such normal sexual desire seems clearly to have been exacerbated by other psycho-social, familial factors.

Psychologically, Augustine was emotionally stuck between his strong sexual desire for the sensual fulfillment of sexual love and affection, on the one hand, and, on the other, his frustration about not being able to have control of and mastery over the arousal of sexual desire in himself. How did Augustine get into this neurotic condition of being a slave to sexual lust? Here is one possible explanation based on the evidence that Augustine himself shares with his readers.

Augustine's mom and dad did not have the best of love relationships. His dad, Patricius, was a worldly man who was supposedly abusive to his wife. His mom, Monica, eighteen years younger than her husband, was from a Christian family and was herself devoutly religious. Given these differences in age and religion, it is not surprising that there was contention and conflict between Patricius and Monica, that Monica did her best to steer clear of, demonstrating her clever resourcefulness and her willfulness. Consequently, however, it is not hard to imagine that Augustine's mom was not getting her emotional needs met by her husband. It would not be unusual or uncommon in such a situation for her to fall into a triangulated relationship with her son, easily accomplished due to the social acceptability of the mother/son relationship. Such a family diagnosis syncs well with Augustine's own report of his early childhood and youth and his relation to his parents in his *Confessions*.

Augustine was Monica's first child. He was highly intelligent, personable, and attractive. Augustine's dad died when he was sixteen, leaving him more vulnerable to his mom's emotional influence and leaving her more dependent on her eldest son. Not only would it be natural for Monica to focus on her son to meet some of her needs for love and affection, but also to ratify the rightness of her religious beliefs and her way of life over that of pagan, now deceased, Patricius. The unfortunate result for the child in this type of triangulated family situation is the deprivation of unconditional love that a child would normally get from his parents if they were truly in love with one another and fulfilled in that love. That was not Augustine's situation. Thus, the marital conflict between Monica and Patricius undermined the possibility of Augustine experiencing unconditional parental love, an outcome consistent with family triangulation theory since you cannot love someone unconditionally and use them to fulfill your needs, laying the groundwork for an overvaluation of the sexual love relation during Augustine's adolescence.

Monica's particular and self-fulfilling love for her son was certainly not unconditional. Her actions had mixed motives among which was her own emotional needs for love and affection, which, of course, is not an abnormal need in itself. She would necessarily have represented to herself that her actions were all for the good of her son. But the genuine, caring do-gooder and the selfish

manipulator can be hard to distinguish in practice, even within oneself.

But listen closely to what Augustine had to say about his meddling mother following him to Milan, after he tried to ditch her, and who, when she did catch up with him, promptly sent his deeply beloved mistress and mother of his son, Adeodatus, back to Africa because she was low-born and not good enough for her son:

“The woman with whom I was in the habit of sleeping was torn from my side on the grounds of being an impediment to my marriage, and my heart, which clung to her, was wounded and broken and dripping blood. She had returned to Africa after having made a vow to you [God] that she would never go to bed with another man, and she had left with me the natural son I had had by her. But I, in my misery, could not follow the example of a woman. I had two years to wait until I could have the girl to whom I was engaged [Monica had arranged a marriage for her son with a 13-year-old girl], and I could not bear the delay. So, since I was not so much a lover of marriage as a slave to lust, I found another woman for myself... Nor was the wound healed which had been made by the cutting off of my previous mistress. It burned, it hurt intensely, and then it festered, and if the pain became duller, it became more desperate” (*Confessions* VI, 15).

It seems reasonable to me to at least consider the theory that Monica, perhaps unwittingly, used her son and manipulated him to fulfill her own personal emotional and social needs. The net result of Monica's positioning of herself in such a fashion in her son's life is that Augustine was left desiring the unconditional love he didn't get naturally from his parents. And perhaps that is why he became obsessively focused on love and the desire for love, the need for love that he felt so keenly but which he experienced as unbridled lust. It wasn't only carnal pleasures that he was seeking in the fleshpots of Carthage. He was neurotically and unconsciously searching for the unconditional love he didn't get from his parents. Naturally, he was not able to find what he was looking for in his contingent love conquests and mistresses from the lower classes. The love he found there, though physically satisfying, was never enough. Given his unquenchable obsession and frustration with sex, along with the persistent nagging of his mother, Augustine would finally find what he was looking for in a love relationship with a transcendent God and a lifelong celibate commitment to his beloved "Holy Mother" the Church. What he was unable to get from the woman he loved, he was able to get from this projection of mom onto the church. That alone, sealed with a vow of celibacy, gave him mastery and control over his obsessive sexual desires.

Finally, Augustine is able to resolve his obsessive-compulsive need for love by concluding that his inability to control his sexual desire and his sexual organ is not his personal fault. Rather, it is

the fault of original sin and the consequent fall into sexual lust of Adam and Eve that Augustine labels “concupiscence”—a convenient, rather obvious, explanatory rationalization. Augustine comes to believe that concupiscence, the proclivity to sin, especially sexual sin, is passed on to all human beings through sexual intercourse, specifically, the sexual pleasure involved. The only realistic antidote to this situation for Augustine, the only force strong enough to control his felt to be unquenchable sexual desire, is complete abstinence, since, after his conversion, Augustine clings to the unnatural idea that *all* sex outside marriage and *all* sex that is not open to procreation is sinful and wrong because it cuts us off from God and must be avoided since there are many ways to go wrong sexually but only one narrow way to go right. Thus, Augustine converts to Christianity and embraces celibacy which, whatever else it may or may not represent, is certainly an effective compensation reaction for his sexual obsession and, simultaneously, the fulfillment of his desire for unconditional love. For Augustine, his ‘conversion’ to the priestly life is like hitting the jackpot.

But what, exactly, is wrong about sex that is not open to procreation? According to Augustine, it is a sin against nature because the natural and thus correct use of sex is exclusively for procreation, an idea that will be ratified and carried forward by Thomas Aquinas and his natural law perspective in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and is still going strong today, affecting the lives of

millions, maybe billions of Christians and which has influenced sexual mores and norms generally in the West. All other sex, other than sex that is open to procreation in marriage, is deviation and sin. Masturbation would be the quintessential unnatural vice since it is absolutely closed off to procreation, a sin that Aquinas thinks is more vicious than rape.

It is well-known that Augustine's pessimistic views about sexuality, women, marriage, and the human condition have been and continue to be hugely influential for the development of Western sexual consciousness. Augustine's neurotic ideas are still dominant factors in everyday conventional life. Sexual pessimism is the default conventional Western attitude about sex, despite the banal, superficial representation of sex in media, the arts, etc. The mainstay of Augustine's orientation is that sexual energy and sexual practice must be constrained, repressed, and controlled because all sexuality, except for a very narrow range of permissible sex, is evil and will lead to the degradation of the person since human nature itself is rendered fundamentally corrupt by original sin. And that repression of sexuality in the Western tradition will have many negative consequences for individuals and for Western society as a whole, many victims and lots of collateral damage.

In her formidable and well-researched critique of Catholic Christian sexuality, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, the theologian and Church scholar, Uta Ranke-Heinemann, asserts that "... for Augustine, the convert, procreation became the only goal

and purpose of marriage, while he saw pleasure as an evil. 'I am convinced,' Augustine wrote, 'that nothing turns the spirit of man away from the heights more than the caresses of woman and those movements of the body, without which a man cannot possess his wife.'" (Soliloquies I, 10)

Ranke-Heinemann continues to point to Augustine's rather obvious pessimistic misogyny and naturalistic view of sexuality in his formulation of original sin and its concupiscent consequences for human nature:

"Augustine was the great creator of the Christian image of God, the world, and humanity that is still widely accepted today. He took the contempt for sex that saturates the work of the Church Fathers, both before him and in his own day, and to it he added a new factor: A personal and theological sexual anxiety. Augustine connected the transmission of original sin, which plays so great a role in his system of redemption, with the pleasure of sexual intercourse. For him original sin means eternal death, damnation for everyone who has not been redeemed by God's grace...."

(76)

Ranke-Heinemann thinks it is perfectly clear that Augustine saw the pleasure of sex as the very source of original sin. She says that "Augustine thought that when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit of Paradise, 'they were ashamed and covered their sexual parts with fig leaves.' He concludes from this

that ‘this is where it comes from.’ He means that what they were both trying to hide was the place whence the first sin is transmitted” (*Sermons* 151,8).

Regarding the fact that he is unable to control his lust or his sexual organ, Augustine places the blame for this squarely on the concupiscence which followed from the sin of Eve and Adam and thus distances himself from taking personal responsibility for this ‘fault’. Ranke-Heinemann points to a most revealing passage where Augustine asks: “But whence comes this unique situation of the sexual organs, that they are not ‘moved by the will,’ but ‘excited by lust’? And answers himself: ‘...the retribution for disobedience is simply disobedience itself...’ Punishment for the Fall was first exacted in the realm of sexuality. The attitude of the Church’s celibate hierarchy is that the locus par excellence of sin is sex, a view based on Augustine’s pleasure-hating fantasies.” (90) Unfortunately, Western sexual consciousness has been the victim of those “pleasure-hating” fantasies now for almost two centuries.

In sum and ratifying my previous family triangulation analysis, according to Ranke-Heinemann, “Augustine was the father of a fifteen-hundred-year-long anxiety about sex and an enduring hostility to it. He dramatizes the fear of sexual pleasure, equating pleasure with perdition in such a way that anyone who tries to follow his train of thought will have the sense of being trapped in a nightmare.” (78)

## **Wilhelm Reich: The Evil of Sexual Repression and How to Overcome it**

In the *The Function of the Orgasm*, Wilhelm Reich goes to the heart of the main thesis of the book when he claims that “the immediate cause of many devastating diseases can be traced to the fact that man is the sole species which does not fulfill the natural law of sexuality.” Sexual suppression causes disease. But what does Reich mean by the natural law of sexuality? This can be understood more clearly through the lens of what Reich calls “orgastic potency.” According to Reich, “psychic health depends upon orgastic potency, i.e., upon the degree to which one can surrender to and experience the climax of excitation in the natural sexual act. It is founded upon the healthy character attitude of the individual’s capacity for love. Psychic illnesses are the result of a disturbance of the natural ability to love. In the case of orgastic impotence, from which the overwhelming majority of people suffer, damming-up of biological energy occurs and becomes the source of irrational actions.”

According to Reich, “the essential requirement to cure psychic disturbances is the re-establishment of the natural capacity for love. It is dependent upon social as well as psychic conditions.” Reich’s idea regarding the failure of orgastic potency among the masses goes along with my belief that big government, big business, and big religion all seek to control the masses through the control and constraint of sexual energy in one way or another, an

idea to which Reich points when he asserts that “compulsive morality and pathological sexuality go hand in hand.” That certainly seems to be the case with Augustine, and many after him, much to their detriment and ours, if Reich is correct.

Reich goes on to say that “it is banal and sounds rather hackneyed, but I maintain that every person who has succeeded in preserving a certain amount of naturalness knows this: *those who are psychically ill need but one thing—complete and repeated genital gratification*” (emphasis added).

Reich is very clear about the centrally important place of the surrendering aspect of “orgastic potency” for good health both psychically and physically, more important than mere erectile or ejaculative potency. He puts it this way: “Erective and ejaculative potency are merely indispensable preconditions for orgastic potency. Orgastic potency is the capacity to surrender to the flow of biological energy, free of any inhibitions; the capacity to discharge completely the dammed-up sexual excitation through involuntary, pleasurable convulsions of the body. Not a single neurotic is orgastically potent, and the character structures of the overwhelming majority of men and women are neurotic.” This claim is backed up by clinical experience, Reich asserts. He states that “clinical experience shows that, as a result of universal sexual suppression, men and women have lost the ability to experience complete surrender (“orgastic potency”) to the involuntary and and overwhelming immersion of sexual desire.” In short, Reich

firmly believes that “every form of neurosis has a genital disturbance which corresponds to it.” And that disturbance is due to the imposition of socio-economical demands on the natural expression of sexual desires. “Sexual repression,” Reich claims, “is of a socio-economic and not of a biological origin.” This is a very clear outcome of the Industrial Revolution, how it has impacted the geography of the human body..

Sexual suppression has the function of making man amenable to authority, just as the castration of stallions and bulls has the function of producing willing draft animals. No one had thought about the devastating consequences of *psychic castration*, and no one can predict how human society will cope with them.

According to Reich’s analysis, there is ample evidence to support the contention that “the cultural upheavals of the twentieth century” are determined by mankind’s struggle to reclaim the natural laws of sexuality, as Reich makes clear in his analysis of the three layers of the human psyche:

The patriarchal, authoritarian era of human history has attempted to hold the asocial impulses in check by means of compulsive moralistic prohibitions. It is in this way that civilized man, if he can indeed be called civilized, developed a psychic structure consisting of three layers. On the surface, he wears an artificial mask of self-control, compulsive insincere politeness, and pseudo-sociality. This

mask conceals the second layer, the Freudian 'unconscious', in which sadism, avarice, lasciviousness, envy, perversions of all kinds, etc., are held in check without, however, being deprived of the slightest amount of energy. This second layer is the artificial product of a sex-negating culture and is usually experienced consciously as a gaping inner emptiness and desolation. Beneath it, in the depth, natural sociality and sexuality, spontaneous joy in work, the capacity for love, exist and operate. This third and deepest layer...is feared. It is at variance with every aspect of authoritarian education and control. At the same time, it is the only real hope man has of one day mastering social misery." (234)

Sex-negating cultures are carried along by sex-negating religions, aided and abetted by big business and big government "in the disruption of the unity of body feeling by sexual suppression, and in the continual longing to re-establish contact with oneself and with the world, lies the root of all sex-negating religions. 'God' is the mysticized idea of the vegetative harmony between self and nature. From this viewpoint, religion can be reconciled with natural science only if God personifies the natural laws and man is included in the natural process," an idea with a hint of Spinozan pantheism coming to the surface and which thus implicates and characterizes some Eastern approaches to sexuality, such as can be found in the Taoist approach to human sexuality.

## **Taoist Sexuality**

Reflections in this section are based primarily on two works by Mantak and Maneewan Chia: *Taoist Secrets of Love: Cultivating Male Sexual Energy* and *Healing Love Through the Tao: Cultivating Female Sexual Energy*

The Taoist understanding and practice of sexuality is substantially different than the prevailing Western model. Whereas Western consciousness, thanks to Augustine's sexual pessimism, looks at sexuality as those actions that are rationally and mechanically necessary for procreation, Taoism views human sexuality as one of the most essential life energies, one that should be cultured and developed, refined and savored.

Sex energy is called jing or ching. Jing is infused with qi or chi. Chi is the most elemental and pervasive of all life energy and is in all human actions according to the harmonic principles of yin/yang. Chi and jing are especially concentrated in semen and so, semen is not to be wasted meaninglessly, purposelessly. Seminal retention, sex without typical orgasmic ejaculation, especially for men, is a centrally important aspect of sexual practice in the Taoist tradition so that chi energy is amplified by jing energy during sex and is not lost through ejaculatory orgasm.

"The Tao or the 'Way' for every human being," Chia asserts, "is to creatively transform their energy over the course of a lifetime

back to its original state of harmonious balance.” The “refining of one’s awareness of sexual energy—with or without a partner—is one of the simplest ways for humans to return to pure consciousness and experience the deepest rhythms of life.”

Here is a summary of the three fundamental tenets of the Taoist approach to sex, according to Chia, an approach to sexual practice dating back 8000 years or more.

**1. Conservation of sexual energy is the first principle.** “Taoists accept sexual love as natural and healthy but know the momentary pleasure of genital orgasm with ejaculation is superficial compared to the profound ecstasy possible when love is enjoyed without the loss of the powerful male seed.”

**2. Transformation of sex energy is the second principle of cultivation.** During sexual arousal, the “ching” or sexual essence stored in the testicles expands rapidly and causes some energy to naturally rise to higher centers in the heart, brain, glands, and nervous system. This upward movement is cut short by ejaculation outward, so most men never become aware of the full power of their sexuality. The Taoist method perfects this upward transformation of sex energy by opening subtle channels from the genitals up the spine to the head and back down the spine to the navel.”

**3. Balancing the polarity of female-male (yin-yang) forces is the third principle.** Balancing this core sexual polarity in a couple

or within oneself is true depth psychology, as it nourishes man and woman and the solo practitioner at their innermost root.

\* \* \* \*

I first became aware of the Taoist publications of Mantak Chia in 1987 while studying for my doctorate in philosophy. I was particularly interested in his book entitled *Taoist Secrets of Love: Cultivating Male Sexual Energy*, discussed briefly above, since I had long been interested in Eastern philosophy generally, and Taoist spiritual practice specifically. Chia details and illustrates esoteric but down-to-earth sexual practices based on ancient Chinese philosophy in the Taoist tradition in a clear and lucid style—one of the first English-language texts to make these Taoist sexual practices and concrete spiritual disciplines readily available to Western readers.

The basic idea of the sexual practice for men presented in the text, as noted above, involves the arousal of sexual energy (“*ching Chi*”), the withholding of this energy through seminal retention (non-ejaculation), and the assimilation and circulation of the aroused energy in what Chia calls the “microcosmic orbit”—a fundamental spiritual pathway of energy that circulates in and around the body, along with lesser ‘circuits’ radiating out from the primary orbit.

The aroused sexual energy can also be ‘stored’ for future ‘use’ and can be deployed in various ways for healing, spiritual growth and development, and to help yourself and others in various practical ways. The energy can also be used for accomplishing specific things in the world and for sexual ‘magik’—ends Chia dismisses as subordinate to the true purpose of the practice.

The benefits of this practice are claimed by Chia to be robust good health of mind, heart, and body; spiritual growth and development; peace and tranquility, happiness, longevity, and, ultimately, immortality. When I read about this sexual practice back in 1987, I was excited by the possibility of an alternative to the repressive, disease engendering Western representation and repression of sexuality inherited from Augustine’s pessimism, if even a fraction of the Taoist claims were true—hopefully not too good to be true! I found the logic of seminal retention to be of special interest.

Intrigued by Chia’s clear presentation of the ancient Chinese ideas, I began the practice of working with the various exercises he describes for becoming a proficient and caring lover, including numerous meditative exercises geared to mastering the process of seminal *Kung Fu*, as well as physical and emotional exercises. There is a lot more to it than one might think at first glance since the sexual relation for humans engages every aspect of one’s life, involving many subtle energies with subordinate, connective energies. Human beings are essentially sexual. Sex is

not something added on to a neutral human being. The repressive denial of sexuality is a denial and repression of our very humanity. To become proficient at the practice of seminal *Kung Fu* requires that one get his or her whole life in order, as effective engagement with the practice will demand this, a lifetime project. No parts will function well unless they are integrated properly in the whole.

After more than thirty years of sometimes occasional and sometimes sustained practice, mostly without a partner, I believe I have made some progress with seminal *Kung Fu*, although in no way do I think I have mastered or even come close to mastering this ancient art and science of lovemaking in its manifold subtleties and connected, as it is, to the whole psycho-sexual-social domain.

For the most part, Chia describes the process from a practice-perspective that involves a loving and committed couple, which would be the ideal, I suppose, although the practice of seminal retention and contemplative circulation and deployment of aroused sexual energy can also be accomplished just as well alone, as Chia states. Okay, maybe not 'just as well' ... anyway, what does that mean, as if the solo and dual practices can be effectively compared, which they cannot be and should not be. It is all one and the same practice. It is great if you can manage to have a partner in this practice, but dual practice is a very challenging part of the ideal, especially since romantic love relationships are already a challenge for Westerners due to reasons having nothing to do with the Taoist

practice of seminal *Kung Fu*, as such, and a lot more to do with Augustinian pessimism. But it becomes very clear when engaging in the Taoist practice of seminal retention that you must get your relational life straight, as a whole, free from the value-laden depiction of sexuality proffered by current conventional culture, eliminating all bias and pretense before you will be able to make any real progress with Taoist sexuality.

For example, how could spiritual development happen through sexual energy if you are lying to, attempting to manipulate or control or fake it in any way with your lover, or not completely open with one another? Not possible. And the same is true for the *whole* of my life since it is the whole of me alone which engages the practice. I must be in harmony and sync in all areas of my life: personal, practical, emotional, social, intellectual, etc., in accordance with the values I live by. The practice itself will *require* that of you if you are to progress in the practice to the higher accomplishments.

One thing I have found about the practice of seminal *Kung Fu* is that it requires that I come out in the open about myself; no hiding in delusion and pretense. That would also be true for a couple. It is crucial that there be a relationship of genuine love, care, and respect between the partners who would engage in this love-generating practice, requiring openness, forthrightness, and a kind of rare transparency and harmony between the two lovers, such that they become one in their life and lovemaking, generating

and circulating the love energy through the exceptional experience of what Chia calls the Valley Orgasm rather than the typical ejaculatory orgasm that drives the Western approach.

In many ways, relationship is a fundamental part of the practice, getting love relationships straight in your life, always a challenge. I know. I have found it exceedingly difficult to do and have consequently relied more on solo practice for my development over the years, which has its own challenges, while always hoping and praying for a partner to appear. This has led me into a prolonged examination and exploration of romantic/sexual/love relationships in my life and in the society in which I live.

Also, partners engaging in this practice would have to be on the same wavelength regarding the practice itself and its importance. For example, making love in this practice is done frequently and slowly and can necessitate a fair amount of time from the daily or weekly schedule, which should revolve around the practice and not the other way around. It becomes a major pathway to spiritual development. So, partners would have to find time for the practice—while still dealing with all the other time-demanding issues and interests of life. This can be more challenging than it sounds on a daily basis, long-term. Maintaining a vigorous sexual relationship for the purpose of spiritual development with a partner is difficult to accomplish in our society because of the widespread conventionality of sexual values and

beliefs generated in a culture of materialism, consumerism, secularism, etc. and guided by beliefs stemming from the work of theologians like Augustine and Aquinas.

There are many ways to be led astray and go wrong in the Taoist practice of love, just as there are many ways for love relationships to go wrong under any circumstances. It has been hard enough trying to find and maintain a genuine love relationship, but on top of that, to find a partner who would be interested in and capable of engaging this esoteric practice and be able and willing to engage it effectively...that is another matter. To find such a partner would certainly be a gift of great value.

*“Life is simple and natural if you keep it that way.... For example, to balance the sexual relationship you basically need to know that woman is water and has the power to regulate man, who is fire. On a deeper level, you would discover that man has both fire and water in his body and can achieve a perfect internal balance by harmonizing his fire (thinking mind) with his own water (sperm fluid, or sexual “waters”).”*

## Erotic Love and Friendship Love

Erotic love  
ignites at a glance,  
flares on the surface  
here and now,  
cannot be contained,  
rips like wildfire  
across the ground  
burning all in its path  
running its course  
out of control  
a passionate dance  
a blazing embrace  
a fire of desire  
mad with consuming  
leaping toward sky  
self-immolating  
communion  
ecstatic....

Friendship love  
is subterranean and cool  
roots branching deep  
into rich lode of ore,  
fingers soft searching  
old loamy earth  
ancient and solid  
sinew and substance  
blood running pure  
steady and sure  
steady and sure  
leveling like water  
at home with itself  
always at ease,  
a stream moving mountains,  
unstoppable  
timeless  
assured....

Eros throws back its head and laughs.  
Friendship bows low and smiles.

Eros devours and feeds on its frenzy.  
Friendship engenders and nurtures growth.

Eros is fire. Friendship is water.  
How could these ever mix?

# 19.

## Marriage and Sexuality

I was raised within a Catholic Christian framework. I learned from various sources that there were only two appropriate lifestyles within this framework, thanks to Augustine: monogamous Catholic Christian marriage involving a man and a woman or the Catholic Christian religious life of a priest. Outside of these two life orientations...well, there was no outside for me. Any other lifestyle was unacceptable and “sinful” due to Augustinian concupiscence, meaning that whoever does such things is cut off from God. Not a place you want to be.

The two acceptable Catholic lifestyles had sexual ramifications, of course. Sexual activity was only acceptable within a monogamous marriage between a man and a woman and, again, from the Catholic perspective to which I was bound as a “cradle Catholic,” always had to be open to procreation and thus without the use of contraceptives (except for the so-called “rhythm” method, which was hard to understand, let alone practice). The other lifestyle alternative, the religious life of a priest or nun, required sexual celibacy. Any other forms of sexuality were simply unacceptable, sinful, and to be avoided.

As a child, I found these alternatives to be stultifying to even think about. They seemed unrealistic and highly questionable as

meaningful lifestyle formats. Motivated by a fear of “going to hell” for all eternity if I did not accept them, however, was a powerful reinforcer of acquiescence to avoid guilt. All in all, the Catholic Christian lifestyle outlook was troubling and would remain troubling for me throughout most of my adulthood until I was able to break free from that childhood conditioning and repression.

I have long believed that “marriage” is a lifestyle orientation that is created from the gift of the given ‘chemistry’ by the people who make a commitment to it and who then act on that public commitment socially. Neither God nor the church or the state “marries” anyone or is needed to create a marriage. Although these institutions may be called on to “witness” a marriage, none are necessary for a marriage to happen. A marriage lifestyle ends when the persons who entered into it publicly withdraw their commitment and act on that socially. Whether property needs to be divided, official documents need to be signed for the state or the church, or children’s welfare accounted for, is entirely another matter of some importance, obviously. But the marriage “per se” is over once one or both say that it is over and act on that decision.

Monogamous marriage—given its high rate of failure in divorce or in staying together in an unfulfilling union for the sake of the kids, for security, for financial reasons, for social acceptance, for fear of not doing so, etc.—should not be the only acceptable lifestyle format other than the celibate religious life. And, among many people today, of course, it isn’t.

Monogamous relationships are the breeding ground of possessiveness, suspicion, lack of trust, fear, heartbreak, jealousy, and other forms of unhappiness. Polygyny, polyandry, “open” marriage, polyamory (whether heterosexual, homosexual, or non-sexual) or any other consensual arrangements that meet the needs of the committing participants to the marriage, can be meaningful lifestyle orientations for those who choose them. And they should be socially supported or at least tolerated as such.

Given the high rate of failure and consequent suffering resulting from monogamous marriage, especially when predicated upon the Myth of Romantic Love (MORL)—fall madly in love with someone, get engaged, get married, have children, grandchildren, become best friends and enduring passionate lovers, effective life partners, and live happily ever after—people are choosing not to get married and the marriage rate has been steadily decreasing for last few decades. Instead of traditional marriage, there is a lot of experimenting going on with alternatives to monogamy and celibacy. That is a good and necessary thing and about time. Why should anyone stay stuck with a lifestyle format that is only beneficial less than half the time? Would you buy a car that only started half the time?

Procreation is not the primary or exclusive purpose of marriage and need not be a part of a successful marriage at all. From the fact that male and female genitals make it possible to procreate, it does not necessarily follow that this is their primary or only purpose, as natural law theorists such as Thomas Aquinas

have argued, since this fails to account for Christine Gudorf's compelling argument re the clitoris: the clitoris is a sexual appendage which is not required for procreation and seems only to have been created by a beneficent God for the purpose of producing pleasure. What did Aquinas know about the clitoris? Why would God create the clitoris if the genitals were designed solely for procreation? Thus, it seems to me that homosexual marriage and non-sexual marriage, or other forms of non-procreative marriage geared to the pleasure and self-fulfillment of the marriage partners, may be meaningful and beneficial lifestyles for marriage partners, if they can manage it against the conventional backlash and persecution.

Human beings are thoroughly sexual from start to finish. Being sexed is not an accidental quality added to a naturally occurring sexless human being. Sexuality is essential to what it means to be human. An asexual human being, that is, a human being who is not at all sexual, is unimaginable and unthinkable. Even human beings who do not engage in sexual arousal or who have lost all or substantial parts of their genitals, are nevertheless sexual and can never become truly "neutral."

Thus, in the same way that it is simply good to be rather than not to be, it is also good to be sexual. Another, more provocative way of stating that is to assert that all sexuality is good. Of course, it is difficult to separate "sexuality in itself" from this or that sexual action. Sexually molesting someone, for example, is morally reprehensible, but it is bad not because it is sexual but because it is

a molestation and molesting or coercion of any kind is always and everywhere wrong.

Bottom line about this is that human sexuality is an integral part of human spirituality. Human spirituality means understanding the purpose of life to be a goal of some kind that transcends the spatio-temporal world and thus engages a set of fully human practices aimed at achieving that goal that I think of as immortality. Such spiritual practices would necessarily have to involve some sexual dimension, i.e., sexuality practiced (solo, dual, group) consciously as prayer, for example. This leads me to wonder about mysticism and sexuality, sexuality in religious ritual, sexuality as sacrament and prayer, sexuality as a practical path to achieving oneness with God, an approach to sexuality requiring an accompanying change of attitude, intentionality, ritual structuring, trying new things, consciousness expansion, etc.

Who is ready for such a daring adventure?

## 20.

# The Deluded Animal and What is Coming to Replace It

The romantic ideal of the erotic love relationship in our society—what I call The Myth of Romantic Love (MORL)—is a virtually unachievable ideal. It is a recipe for failure. What forces would construct a myth that is so toxic? Perhaps we may find an answer if we see who benefits from this human suffering, this human bondage?

The swarming, mesmerized masses of people sleepwalking through their lives of narrow self-interest are in a state of more or less 'blissful' ignorance about what is happening. When you start to look more closely, more phenomenologically, at what is happening, opening your heart and mind to seeing it without prejudice, as it unfolds of its own accord, you soon see that people are generally ignorant about what is really happening with themselves and in their lives, glossing over their lack of self-awareness with conventional platitudes. They sleepwalk mechanically through a fog of misguided beliefs every day, feeling strongly that all of reality is clear, comprehensible, and straightforwardly given. They whisper assuredly to themselves

that God is in heaven, and all is right with the world; no need to worry or wonder; life has a clear and comprehensive rule book built into it that simply needs to be followed. In other words, they are comfortably and complacently deluded. But there is a little problem with the false comfort of delusion.

When the impoverished, conventional, TV-driven lives of the masses don't work out as they hoped, when, by an unexpected turn of events they fall into the pit of depression, disillusionment, self-doubt and despair, then the deluded masses have no framework for understanding how to deal with that or what to do to alleviate it. Must be "bad karma" or God's just punishment for my sins, they tell themselves. Must be bad luck. It surely can't be *my* fault, *my* responsibility. And so, they suffer at their own hand without knowing it, without ever having a clue that they are pulling the rug out from under themselves.

Humans are the animal that has finally achieved the ability to delude itself. Is that progress? What difference does it make to be such a deluded animal who thinks it knows, believes it knows, when, in fact, it doesn't have a clue?

Have we really evolved as a species? There is no conclusive evidence to support the theory of evolution with absolute certitude. There is no clear link between species, no certain proof that something greater can 'evolve' from something less, that natural selection and random mutations could ever produce rationality, consciousness and self-consciousness, value, life itself.

Perhaps it is not so much that humans or any animals or species “evolved” as it is that the whole Earth has ‘evolved’ taking everything along with it, producing everything as a kind of afterthought from the future to the now.

What, then, might be the new generation of animal that Earth will have engendered? It will not be anything that we can see. We can’t even see ourselves or see what is happening, let alone see what is coming. The new earthly animal will arrive unseen among us. Perhaps it has already arrived. Those stuck in the perceptual framework of conventionality will certainly not be able to see the end of delusional storytelling and the new beginning. It will not be like us. It will replace us before we know it. Perhaps it has already replaced us from the future in an evolution that has already been accomplished before it has played itself out. A new way of seeing will be the hallmark of such an enlightened aspirant.

What will it take to be there, to be ready? It will take a letting go of the old way, the comfortable way, the familiar way, the conventional way of everybody and nobody, the old way of striving and contending, figuring out, grasping and clawing at ghosts of delusional self-importance, manipulating and controlling others to get what you want, to see things your way.... Who is willing to let go of all that? Who is daring enough? Free enough? Crazy enough?

## 21.

# Solitude and Community

*He who knows others is wise. He who knows himself is enlightened.*

Laozi

I am different from anyone I know. I live outside the community in a small hut over the hill away from everyone else. I have chosen this or it has chosen me. I do not participate in the events of the community, the cycle of meaning-making and the rituals of meaningful practice that structure the community consciousness, or only seem to conform. These practices are a foreign land to me that I do not desire to visit. I am glad to be shut of the common world.

I am a seer, which is not my fault and, in itself, is not to say much. A seer for no purpose. A seer for no good reason. A seer despite myself. I long ago, since my childhood, thought that in-seeing was a burden, perhaps a curse. Now I see that it is neither a curse nor a blessing. It is simply a way, my way. I have chosen this way and this way has chosen me before I was, when I merely happened to be, a tree blossoming before it existed, a fate I have embraced afterwards, one which few understand, including me, the burdens and blessings of the seer. The incantations come full circle

from the future to the past. Everything that is already was first. There is no turning back. Only laughter above all. Oh, my friends, I am not normal, nor do I wish such a fate, since I want to see before norms constrain my seeing into conformity, to see before seeing becomes seeing. To be normal is to belong to the community, to be real because you see what the community sees. Normal is defined by the community sitting around the fire telling stories to beat back the terrorizing and anonymous dark and to find comfort from deep, unspeakable, marauding fears; sitting around the TV staring at the gods they have made, gods that the elite power-brokers have provided for them, hoping for something more.

What are the signs of 'belonging' to the community? Having a job, married with family, cars, skis, house, a big TV, etc., with upwardly mobile desires running rampant. I have none of these nor do I desire them. Only laughter and disdain and language and seeing like a blind man hears with a clarity born of deprivation. A follower of Diogenes the Cynic, perhaps more radical than Diogenes, for even Diogenes has managed to find his way into the history books, a conventional character. What scorn he would have for that! I am aligned with the anonymous and have invited the faceless in for tea. The truth of the matter is that I prefer this life of the blind and marginalized seer. You cannot see that to which you are attached, what holds you together inseparably. What choice do I have? It is also what seems to have been given to me as a birthright—to live apart so that I might see the blindness of others,

to be different from everyone else, to be cast out so that I might see in. That is my fate, my way. I wish I did not have to work at a job at all, did not have to make the effort to appear even marginally normal. I wish I could just get up in the morning as I do now and pursue my own solitary ends like the birds and the lilies. I try to do that, following Jesus and Lao Tzu. I do it without trying. Trying is of no use.

The poverty of non-attachment is the door to such freedom. I have no political power, no social power, no financial power, only the awesome power of powerlessness. But I see clearly, more clearly than everyone else who has forsaken their seeing for the comfort of the community, for the consolation of being real, as if it was their choice. Ha! There is little that I can do about it. There is little that I care to do about it. Lord, what fools these mortals be! Self-destructive to the core. It is hard living among mortals.

I am not *totally* disconnected from the community, of course. That is not permitted without medication. Like a prisoner condemned to a life incarcerated, I am still connected to the community by a thin thread of meaning, by the very walls that keep me apart, by these words I write. Prisoners can only be prisoners in terms of the community. How else could you be shut away? I still have language, that little fire, that little warmth, that little thread of connectivity, Ariadne's thread. Without language, there would be no bars, no walls, no community! What a joke! Paradise does not require language, forbids it. It is such a rare humor to see

that I see and to see that others do not see me seeing that they do not see. Laughter I have pronounced holy, Nietzsche declared. I used to fear loneliness and despise the invisible fate of the seer. Now I see that refusal is useless. But resignation, letting go, attaching by detachment, these bring smiling energy.

This is how I connect with Jesus and with all prisoners. I feel that I am a prisoner living in luxury, a luxury prison, because I still seem to have so much connecting me to the community: my old truck, this computer I am working on, the roof over my head, food in the fridg. It is impossible to be totally disconnected from the community. To be totally disconnected would be to be outside of language altogether, outside of the possible and the possibility of the impossible. It would be madness, ecstatic, the end.

Community arises within the house of language. Community and language are coexistent. To go outside of meaningful language is to go inconceivably mad. It is to be truly alone, worse than alone. Nietzsche falling protectively on the whipped horse, himself whipped into madness. It is possible to make forays into the wild, but not for long, the way the poets do, some poets, anyway. Bukowski comes to mind; yet he was published, sought recognition, clamored for a name, so much suffering. All true poets are mad. Outside of language (an impossibility) is the anonymous. Perhaps the infant's "Dada" or "Mama" is the doormat; facing before it becomes a face. Few come close to going there. Who could blame them? They prefer their houses and spouses and icons of

power, their TV's and tweets, their conflagration of impotence and desire.

I alone am laughing in the shadows. Laozi and I, Nietzsche and Diogenes and Jesus and a host of other free spirits. How frightened are all those comfort-seekers, huddling together against the dark and the cold and the meaningless, telling their stories in little clutches where they feel safe, creating their myths by rubbing sticks of hope together, wanting someone else to take care of them, wanting to be saved from themselves, ever willing to give up their own identity for a little more felt security. Is that what you desire in your heart of hearts? Is that why you are reading this text? The rabbit will not become a hawk by wishing it were so.

Whatever is not your fate becomes your prison if you desire it. The line between fate and self-determination is elusive and impossible to comprehend absolutely. It is the focus of an everyday work, this determination, this seeing, this incompleteness looking into Forever backwardly hoping to glimpse its own possibility. Even now....

## 22.

# Sensing Me Sensing

This morning it feels marvelous to be alive, to be awake, to be sensing. What is it, then, to be alive, awake, aware, conscious, self-conscious, sensing? What do these hopeful words long to signify? Perhaps we could see that more clearly by making them disappear.

Suppose I could not see. I close my eyes. Darkness. The sight world 'out there' is gone for me. Suppose, additionally, I could not hear. I try to shut off my hearing, I plug my ears. Birdsong, cars passing by 'out there', the fridge humming ... all gone. Suppose I had no feeling, no touch, numb from head to toe. All my contact points with what is 'not me' disappear: my feet on the floor, buttocks on the chair, air against my skin, my one hand touching the other, my fingers touching my face. Which is touching which? There is a kind of excitation in each that lights up at the point of contact extending inward and backward, gradually fading from the point of contact, a single connected current. Not much to smell or taste. I feel my tongue touching the roof of my mouth. Wherever I am split off from myself, reflexive touch is possible. Legs can touch one another, arms, fingers. Cleavage makes touching possible; separation creates the conditions for coming together. It is marvelous that I can fold into myself, as if my whole body were a thumb and an index finger. Perceptually, this self-folding is the

magical birth point of my consciousness of being conscious. The material world is gone with my senses. What I am left with, the residue of my sense reduction, is my 'pure' consciousness of what is happening and my self-consciousness that it is happening to me. Pure me. Nothing.

Within my consciousness there is the sense of myself inwardly, starting from some ever-receding point inside myself, as if moving outward, rushing headlong toward the boundaries of my skin, seeking release, expression, actualization, freedom. I can particularize this if I flex the muscles of my stomach, can also feel a slight pressure of myself as inner pushing out, what is inside my head pushing against my skull boundary, streaming through my fingers into the keyboard, cyborg-like, a knowledgeable energy. And then there is my immediate self-consciousness of this which I seem only instantaneously aware of before it becomes a focused conscious awareness, which I can then make into an object of reflection.

But as this focus on my inner experience or sensation is directed to one part of my body inwardly, like my stomach muscles for example, I see that I am not aware of other parts of me inwardly, like the pressure of what is inside my head pushing against my face or skull.

The center of this floating, directed conscious awareness, with a kind of diffuse bodily sense always in the background, is a voice within my consciousness that is thinking, describing,

agitating, wondering, playing, hoping ... what is getting transcribed into these visual symbols right now as I type them, little symbols that stand for what I am experiencing, as best they can, stand for me.

It is wonderful just to be alive! Time for a morning walk. Time to give this marvelous surging of life that I am a chance to breathe the fresh mountain air ....

# Cherry Strudel

We sliced narrowing  
Wedges of sweetness,  
Unable to stop,  
Angela and I,  
Giggling and wondering  
If anyone would notice  
Our finger-feeding greed  
In the morning. Uncaring if  
They did.

We should have been  
More considerate,  
I suppose,  
Less intoxicated  
With our own simple being  
In that midnight kitchen,  
Raiding the fridge and  
Ravaging the unsuspecting  
Cherry strudel.  
But, no.

Sated at two A.M.,  
Strudel gone, we went  
Back to our separate beds  
Without bothering to say  
Goodnight or goodbye,  
I tucked myself into  
The warm feeling that  
Deep touching brings  
And turned out  
The light.

## 23.

# Invisible Outlaw Philosophy

I am invisible to others. Who they see as me is not me. They see a simulacrum made up of whatever I bring to the table and present as a means, and what they construct and project out of their own conventional values, beliefs, attitudes, historicity, etc. They see me in terms of their own conventionality based mostly on a desire for external things, money, power, fame. I have not developed along the conventional path, as far as I have been able to accomplish. I have followed a philosophical path, an inner-directed path, seeking enlightenment, wisdom, immortality. I have oriented my lived life from values, beliefs, attitudes, and orientations developed from inner exploration and inner experience and not from conformity to external, commonly accepted values. That has made all the difference. And it is why others are unable to see me.

The philosophical path is by its nature a lone-ly way, a solo journey. This is not a degradation from the ideal of duality or partnership. It is the highest and best way, reserved for a very few. Those who have not followed this path cannot see it at all. It is invisible to them. So be it. What about you?

Choosing this way of life or having been chosen by it is how I have come to live outside the law. Civil laws—indeed, the organization of civil society in general—is designed for the

governance of the conventional masses of sleepwalkers who must be governed from without. The Seer adheres to a higher, more stringent law of loving and seeing clearly, unhindered. A feral, undomesticated seeing which requires living in the wild, outside the rational gates of the city where even Socrates was loath to travel; the wild precinct of Diogenes, and then some. Philosophy is this living in the wild, outside all lawfulness, or it is something less than it might be. The philosopher may inadvertently conform to the civil law, but this is not his or her aim, the good citizen, the stalwart. The aim of philosophy is seeing what is happening and living from that practice, a practice that necessarily operates in the wild, beyond the safe haven of the lawful polis.

No one would choose such a risky and challenging path. You would be thought a little mad. Yet, the path may come to choose you....

## 24. Wealth and Seeing

Carolyn got upset with me over our conversation about wealth, poverty, and in-seeing. I suppose it was destined to happen sooner or later given our open friendship. Here is how it went down.

Carolyn, now in her sixties, married Chris, not for the person he was (which did interest her initially, although maybe because she sensed from the outset that this was someone that she could control because he was needy yet a man of means, whereas the poet she really loved was neither someone she could control nor someone of means) but for his money and the security and sense of place Chris offered. At the beginning of their relationship, she was completely focused on poor, needy but wealthy Chris, the new husband. All went seemingly well at first, although Chris needed a lot of attention and care to be brought to life. But Carolyn, the nurse, was up to it.

Shortly after they marry, along comes Dan, the son. Carolyn, not unusually, becomes almost obsessively focused on the baby. Chris feels left out and is unable to cope. The family triangle

comes into being. Carolyn starts to get her good feelings, affectionate and self-esteem needs met by baby Dan, and, to a marginal degree, also from her nursing work allotted to Chris who is mostly needy, sad and depressed all the time. He feels left out, ignored, insignificant, benched. Chris and his doting Mom commiserate about Carolyn and her focus on the baby. Sides are drawn; patterns set in motion. Three years later, Barbara is born. Barbara automatically becomes Chris' favorite, daddy's little girl. And so, a second family romance triangle forms in an attempt to offset the felt loss of Carolyn to Dan. This double triangulation involving both parents and children will lead to some problematic, dysfunctional outcomes. This is reflected in how Carolyn characterizes what happened.

Carolyn talks about the family situation as if the whole problem was due to Chris's "illness," his depressive neediness. Whereas there is some truth to that idea, making it the definitive causal interpretation for what happened, downplays and deemphasizes her own role in the situation involving her own felt need for security and belonging; her instability; her manipulateness; her wanting to get what she wanted rather than to go with what is happening; her wanting to 'get out' of her nowhere hometown, and other complex, subtle, and ignored motives. Supposedly, she loved the poet who got her pregnant, but she did not want to marry *him*, the starving artist. No, she dumps him—a nobody, like someone from her hometown, a going

backwards—and marries Chris: fucked-up but wealthy and able to offer her the financial/family stability she desperately craved and secretly believes she deserves since she was denied that in her own life.

So, in marrying Chris, Carolyn is motivated not so much by her love for Chris as her disdain of her own working-class family of origin, wanting to get out of that, get beyond that. So, she marries Chris even though she really doesn't love him, but she stays with him for the security, leads him along for a while, controlling him, taking 'care' of him until the baby comes along. Then she shifts all her attention and control to baby Dan for the much-needed emotional/sensual payoff she wasn't getting from Chris. That sends Chris into a tailspin, a felt sense of abandonment by his surrogate 'mother' and ultimately into a dark abyss of worthlessness and helplessness that results in his suicide which will provide both a way out of the dilemma for himself and an ultimate castigation aimed at Carolyn that she will have a hard time dealing with, or so he might have desperately hoped in his final confusion.

That is why the money was an issue. In the end, Chris wanted to cut Carolyn out of the will and divorce her. He penned a handwritten directive attempting to do so, but then took his own life. And, despite that she was having an ongoing affair with Chris' best friend and business companion, Carolyn feels that what she got was what she deserved for being married to Chris, for putting

up with him, for raising his children—what seems like defensive positioning and reaction formations.

It was a contest of wills. It still is a contest of wills. Chris's suicide was part of the ongoing and unresolved battle between Chris and Carolyn. It was Chris's ultimate weapon against Carolyn; the suicide weapon. Of course, Chris had to pay the ultimate price, but Carolyn is suffering from this now and she may have a difficult time getting over it because she is very much invested in seeing how the whole thing was Chris's fault, Chris and his mother, certainly not her fault, so she is entitled to the money.

Carolyn will not be able to get out from under this self-imposed dis-integration without confronting her own values, beliefs, attitudes, and desires that got her into the situation in the first place. Whenever I get close to that conflict, she gets upset with me. She says that she feels crushed. What is crushing her is her preferred interpretation and valuation of the millions of dollars underlying her relationship with Chris. She was cut out of the will by Chris, but the lawyers simply reinstated her because he was judged to be 'insane' (he committed suicide, didn't he?) and she was the wife and mother of two children. She said the lawyers decided to ignore Chris' dying wishes.

So now Carolyn has her money and 'sick' Chris and his mom who was killed shortly after her son's suicide when a tree fell on her car while she was driving and killed her instantly, are out the way. She should be enjoying herself. Instead, she is killing herself, burdening herself with all kinds of problems out of guilt—as if

trying to prove to herself that she is a good person and worthy of the money she has gotten. She would like to be able to enjoy what she has gotten, and is trying to, but she is stuck on how she has gotten it (the pressure Chris has kept on her by virtue of his suicide and her affair with his partner) and the impact of this on her life at present.... Hard to enjoy the money when you feel guilty about how you got it.

Carolyn is in conflict. She wants to be seen truly for who she is, but because there is such a lack of self-esteem attached to this true self-image, she also doesn't want to be seen that way. She doesn't want to be seen as lost, angry, weak, sad, helpless, left out, kept out, ignored, unworthy, unattractive, unwanted, uncared-for, etc.—this is what she means when she says she just wanted to get out of her hometown (“hometown” represents this negativity, *is* this negativity! in her life...), so, instead, she tries to control the way others perceive her. Although this seems to work, it is a futile gesture because that way she does not get what she really wants, which is to be seen for who she is.

Carolyn gets irritated with me for challenging her to clarify what does not seem clear to me in what she says. So be it. I am not in charge of her, nor do I have the power to control what she does or does not do. That is just the point. Therefore, people want to keep a sense of “influence” against Epictetus’ assertion that we cannot control how others see us or judge us. We cannot control how others’ judge us, but we can try to control it and maybe convince ourselves that we are controlling it, by presenting

ourselves in such a way that will appear to cause the other person to respond to us in a desired way. That is self-delusion. We cannot control the judgments others make about us, try to 'influence' them as we may, although it may appear to work in some instances.

So, Carolyn's controlling behavior does seem to 'work' in some instances. The more socially remote the situation or persons, the better the cover story works. The place where it doesn't work is in intimate relationships, because if the cover story works there, then the relationship will not work, since relationships only work well when both people are allowing themselves to be present without interference or trying to control what the other sees. If the delusion does seem to work, it may be adaptive: both people adapting to compensate for mutual dysfunctional aspects; complementary neuroses (like what Carolyn calls her "companionate marriage" to Chris). Mostly, it is in intimate love relationships where the dark spaces come to light.

Carolyn feels hurt because I will not accept her interpretation/rendition of the events of her relationship with Chris, like the role money played and still plays in all of this for her. I may be poor, socially marginalized, and alone but because of my dis-interest in material/monetary wealth and other conventional externals, I see what is happening proportionately more clearly and thus have much less inner suffering. Seeing is liberating, whether you like it or not. Those who are rich, socially integrated, and in relationships with rigid boundaries are often deluded about their reality, for various reasons, and thus suffer from inner

confusion, self-doubt, and despair without any understanding of how it is happening, what role they play, or what to do about it.

Maxim: Attachment to wealth is corruptive of seeing.

## Liquid Soul Song

Woke this morning with a song  
Thick and wondrous on my tongue  
Heartfelt honey it appears  
To fingers, toes and  
Dumbstruck ears:  
Come to know  
Who waits for you  
Where waters flow  
Like liquid soul  
And lilacs fragrant  
Bending down  
Are drawn to kiss  
The waiting ground.

For those who dare the wild dream  
The larger landscape overall  
Into the unencumbered scheme  
Fast and furious will fall.

O Come to know  
Who waits for you  
Where waters flow  
Like liquid soul  
Where lilacs fragrant  
Bending down  
Are drawn to kiss  
The waiting ground.



## 25. On Being a Hermit

It is not so much that I want to be a hermit as it is that I want to get away from the hustle and bustle and all the distractions of the world...the energy of everyone seeking to get what they want, to have more, especially wealth and material possessions, an ever-expanding fascist-like desire for more, achieving mindless cultural conditioning and value restructuring in front of a big-screen TV.

I have few attachments to material goods and want even fewer. I strive for a material minimalism as a kind of naturalism and spiritual attunement to what is happening, even though I know that I have it better than most people in the world and live rather luxuriously by comparison. Still, I strive for simplicity and could do without many of the material things I have, were it necessary. I love my motorcycle but would not lament the loss of it. Slowly but surely, we will all be deprived of our material possessions and leave this world as destitute as when we got here. I need some things since I am still in the world, in order to function in the world...this laptop for example. Yet I feel I could be done with this material dependency at any instant, go off with Diogenes. I need to teach to earn money. But I don't need that much. How much do I

need? The thought of living off alms alone, a beggar in the street, sometimes seems to me like a moral ideal, a spiritual challenge, to actually leave town with Diogenes or Jesus.

I still have attachments where it comes to beautiful women, my conditioned weakness. I have always felt vulnerable to beautiful women, susceptible to the power of the beauty they wield, the natural wealth of it. I find beautiful women hard to resist, hard not to desire. Attractive women have been the occasion of my most persistent 'downfall' over the years and have caused the most disruption in my life. Not that the women themselves have caused this, but my inability to stand firm in the face of them, my own susceptibility and over-valuing is what feels so defeating. It is to this idea that I am vulnerable. I have not yet met the woman with whom I could have a meaningful, fulfilling, well-rounded relationship. God knows I have tried. I think that the reason for this is that I desire, more than anything, to be with God, to know that Neoplatonic mystical union with the One that Plotinus described. *Contemplatio* is the finest, the most perfect of human gestures, an ultimate kind of experience of the beyond-made-present, but a lonesome experience.

I think that if it had not been for the obstacle of my father when I was young, if I had felt loved by my parents rather than having to go seeking to find that ground of unconditional love in the arms of a woman (which is impossible), I would have entered upon a priestly life with God from my youth. I experienced a deep love for God when I was a child. I felt called somehow by God. But I found

my path blocked by the impact of my religiously authoritarian father, so that I had no desire to do what he wanted and be a good Catholic. My resentment blocked my spiritual development. I felt no love for my father. Because of his religious militarism, I felt that my way to a formal relationship with the Catholic religion was emotionally blocked. Took the ground out from under me. We are all given our crosses to bear. *Amor fati!*

But I have changed. Now I have finally gotten beyond the block caused by my father. I have forgiven him to the fullest and pray for him and can love him despite his faults and challenges. That opened the way for me to the full practice of my religion, complete with becoming a member of the Knights of Columbus, following in my dad's footsteps, much to my surprise and amazement.

I feel called to focus my life exclusively on God. I must be engaged with the world to some degree to earn a living, but I want to have a minimal relation with the 'world'. Between the need to earn a living and the need for a spiritual community in the Church, I am still well-involved in the world. Beyond that, I try to keep social interactions to a minimum, which is somewhat challenging but mostly quite comfortable. I need to minister to those in need, which means I must still be connected to the world to some degree. Other than those kind of everyday connections with the world, I strive to live the life of a hermit.

I don't know how Paul of Thebes did it back in the 3rd century CE. He went off to the desert and lived in a cave for a

hundred years, making his clothes from palm fronds and being fed by a raven. My vision of being a hermit seeks to emulate the great models of solitaries in the past.

I do not socialize. I do not watch TV. I do not use hot water except to bathe once a day or every other day. I do not eat meat. No alcohol. I use as little electricity as possible. I pray early in the morning, at various times throughout the day, and at night before bed. I try to be in contact with God at all times. Still, I don't know if I am a good hermit or not, or what a good hermit is.... And then I awakened even more, as if from a dream, thanks to a bout of tonsillar cancer.

I came to see that the resurgence of religious interest in my life following my bout with cancer and close brush with death, was born of a deep desire to put my life in order, to get it on the right track, to take a stand and be where I am. For me, in my post-cancer religious fervor, putting my life in order came to mean, first of all, getting right with my father and with his authoritarian, militaristic approach to religion and then getting right with the rest of the world from this new position.

Forgiveness changes nothing about the one forgiven but everything about the one doing the forgiving. Forgiveness is a way of exercising a power that you always hold in your hand, so you can begin to forgive whenever you get there. And remember: You always unburden yourself when you forgive those who have harmed you, a burden they must bear on their own.

## 26.

# Freedom from Attachment

*"Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose."*

*Janis Joplin*

I feel no desire to be 'in the world'. I also do not feel any desire to not be in the world. Everything visible is transitory, thus not really real in the permanent sense of having a fixed essence. Only that which is invisible could be eternal and unchanging and thus capable of being really real. Words are always lacking, like lazy lovers. Yet words are all we have. Language is all-encompassing.

What value is it to become attached by desire to what is visible? None. I don't know how I came to be in this visible world articulated in accordance with my sensing. It is a mystery at every instant. Yet I feel certain that I must guard against getting trapped in this ever-changing realm, getting trapped in the false belief that it is somehow the 'really real'...which is impossible. The really real can only be invisible, unchanging. The really real is eternal, beyond time and temporality. The really real is forever.

I am the most amazing of beings to appear within my own scrutiny. What a strangeness I am to myself! How odd! That I

should be able to be present to myself. I lose the sense of how odd I am in my everyday life among other human beings, a forgetfulness born of habit. I get used to myself. I get lost in everydayness and become familiar to myself, along with everyone else. I take my being for granted and accept it as normal. Yet, my being is far from normal if normal means immediately making sense of or being structured within the comprehensible. I am not comprehensible to myself. I am the oddest of oddities, more odd than odd can be. And even there, in the finest poetry, I do not catch the full strangeness of my being.

Being is forever estranged from itself and does not know itself and will never catch up with itself and reduce itself to an act of knowing certitude or production of knowledge within the temporal, material plane. To think otherwise is presumptuous, a simpering presumptuousness born of a fear of the unknown and unknowable that drives us to fashion our being into the goes-without-saying.

Of all human foolishness, the drive to twist ourselves into the belief that we understand anything, including ourselves, first and foremost ourselves, is the most foolish. We are gripped by Being, yet not for a moment do we grasp it. To believe otherwise is to have given yourself over to the need for some felt-security, some being-found sameness that will save us from our essential lostness. This is the essence of attachment, the place from which you must begin to get free.

I am here, yet I am passing and thus not really here. I do not want to get stuck in the illusion of materiality. This life is merely a passage, a transformation process, a being-born out of what we call death, the final transformation or transmutation of this material plane. Since I am not beset by any suffering, the world appears to be beautiful and gracious and lovely. I bask in the plenitude of it. Yet, pain would wake me from this slumber of plenitude. Pain would be the experience of this carapace of mortality being sundered from its grip of enjoyment within the material plane. The desire to be gone would feel natural then, indeed, will feel natural. Do not be afraid. I am with you even until the end of time, says the Lord. Thank God for that! I can hardly wait for it to begin to not happen. Nothing 'happens' in eternity since it will always already have happened before it could happen since everything is always forever.

My work here is to get free of attachment to being here. To get free of attachment, you must first see clearly how you are attached. Getting-free of attachment is the way of the seer. To become already immortal, to enter upon eternity already as far as that is possible while in this material, temporalized realm, is the only life goal that makes sense to me. Letting-be, letting-go appears to take so long, yet it is over in an instant. I must always begin again now. It is all happening now and nowhere else. Enduring patiently is the presentiment of eternity.

I pray to God to help me in this. I cannot do it on my own. Of course, I can't do anything 'on my own' and, ultimately, am not

responsible for anything that is happening here. What a joke to think otherwise! Arrogance, pride, hubris, self-will, and self-determination are the wolves circling my little fire of hope, my little campfire of love and hope here in this wild place.

My prayer is that God will save me from myself since I am surely my own worst enemy. I want only to walk with God and be with God, yet I trip myself up, go wrong. Somehow God holds on to me. God is my heart's desire. God is everything and more than everything. I cannot grasp God in a concept, yet the love I feel for God soars into the infinite presence of God here with me right now and finds there a place of rest. It is the only real rest I will ever know in this realm of persistent illusions.



*Charcoal sketch by my grandfather, Luigi Galbiati*

*IV.*

*CONFABULATING THE FUTURE*

## 27.

# Attitude is Everything

In the final chapter of *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Pierre Hadot makes a distinction between philosophy understood as a way of life and philosophy understood as a discourse or subject matter to be studied, mastered, and propagated. Hadot argues that the understanding of philosophy as a way of life was typical of ancient Greek philosophy but that this orientation was disrupted by the growth and development of Christianity, starting from around the second century CE. Philosophy has never been the same since.

Christian philosophers like Origen, Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory eagerly transformed the life-oriented, experiential, affective, and therapeutic approach of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy (the "way of life" model), into a definitively *Christian* way of life, incorporating, re-defining, and sublimating pagan ideas to fit the demands of the emergent Christian model.

The philosophical articulation of Christianity took the form of a rational description, analysis, explication, synthesis, and justification of this emergent, grassroots, and somewhat ragtag

religious movement. In this process of religious articulation, philosophy was subordinated to the demands of Christian theology. Thus, the primacy given by ancient philosophers to the practice of philosophy as a way of life was lost, according to Hadot's account, first, to its absorption into the philosophical articulation of a rigorous Christian philosophy, and secondly -- especially after the 12<sup>th</sup> century -- to the exclusive predominance afforded the "scientific" university theology of the Scholastics that appeared in the Medieval period and to which philosophy was granted the position of being a handmaiden.

Academic philosophy—epitomized by professional, university-trained philosophers who are experts in a limited, specific area of philosophy, talking exclusively to other professional academic philosophers within a conceptual clique or reading community—demands that philosophy be taken up and understood as a discourse and subject matter to be studied, argued about, and mastered. Academic mastery is calculated in terms of numbers of publications, papers presented at professional conferences, demand for appearances, and other arbitrary and objective academic measures of performance. What is clear about this approach to philosophy understood as a discourse is that in the contemporary world of philosophy, as Hadot claims, academic philosophy has been wholly sundered from the ancient idea of philosophy as a way of life.

Hadot's distinction between philosophy as a discourse to be studied and philosophy as a way of life to be lived every day

signifies the presupposition of two radically different existential *attitudes* by which individual persons might approach the study of philosophy. Whichever attitude the reader assumes and cultivates will make all the difference regarding how they see the 'field' of philosophy in its sprawling wholeness as well as how they see and are seen by every individual text they encounter. Attitude is everything.

Hadot's insightful distinction sounds as if it refers to the field of philosophy understood as a domain of knowledge that subsists amorphously 'out there' in books, papers, articles, journals, conferences, and the totality of activities of individual philosophers comprising the professional philosophical enterprise. But, to me it seems that the distinction is not so much about the field of philosophy in its totality understood as an abstract "field," as it is about *the very personal attitude that the aspiring practitioner brings to the re-authoring or re-reading of the philosophical text.*

The essential conditionality of Hadot's distinction is grounded in the existential, lived body, mind, and consciousness of the flesh and blood person who brings to the reading of the philosophical text whatever attitude is structuring her or his consciousness. It is from within a somewhat messy and unpredictable attitudinal framework, and not from the perspective of a perceptually neutral *tabula rasa* or exclusively cognitive, clear and distinct idea framework or 'field', that the aspiring reader may hope to gain insight, illumination, understanding, and life-changing

inspiration from the texts encountered in or re-authored by a transformative philosophical-poetic re-reading.

Attitude is of central importance to bringing into being a genuinely transformative reading. But what are we talking about when we talk about attitude? Human attitudes, like many aspects of human being, are an ultimately mysterious phenomenon. The meaning and sense of attitude is difficult to determine. For example, one entire chapter of the psychology text I use in my Intro to Psychology class is entitled “Attitude”—a whole chapter! Ironically, this chapter mostly references what we don’t know about this ephemeral, invisible, ever-present, and hugely deterministic aspect of human consciousness. Given the highly personal, subjective, and individualistic aspects of attitude, it becomes clear that the same text approached from the perspective of one of the two attitudes suggested by Hadot’s distinction, is not the same text approached from within the context of the other attitude. Perhaps reality itself is observer-attitude dependent.

It is not merely that a text is experienced differently depending on one’s attitude. Rather, a text is not the same text from one reading to the next. Each reading, starting from an amorphous given, re-creates the text anew. Understood as a meaning ensemble, the objective text changes in accord with the attitude of the aspirant reader. The inky squiggles on the paper don’t change, perhaps, a realist might want to argue (How could I know if the signs you see when you read are the same as the signs as I see when I read, or the same as you see when you re-read?), yet Gestalt

psychology tells us that readers do not see most of the word squiggles, or all the parts of the squiggles that they do see, when they read anyway. So, it must not be the inky squiggles on the page that comprise the “text” that you read. The text you read is constructed from your interpretation and subjective perception of those squiggles, a process that changes the very meaning structure of the squiggles themselves, a *poietic* and creative process that is guided and constituted by your attitude, however consciously. The text is dependent on the attitude of the reader to bring the text to life as *this* or *that* text. The arrogant, skeptical, high-minded, and narrow-minded cynic does not read the same text as that read by the humble, devout aspirant seeking life-changing illumination from between the lines of the text. Every reader re-authors every text he or she reads. Interpretation is the air we breathe, the air that breathes us. And, like snowflakes and raindrops, no two readings are ever the same.

Duncan Robertson<sup>1</sup>, a scholar speaking from the perspective of the nature, function, and development of reading strategies that emerged and were deployed in the long and venerable tradition of *lectio divina*, says that “Modern reading-theorists have rediscovered certain transcendent dimensions of the act of reading that were altogether familiar to medieval readers.”<sup>2</sup> He cites Frank

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<sup>1</sup> Robertson, Duncan. *Lectio Divina: Volume 238* (Cistercian Studies). Liturgical Press. Kindle Edition, Preface, § “Reading Beyond Reading”.

Smith's psychoanalytic study of reading development to clarify his point: "Reading is a thought-full activity.... It is creative and constructive, not passive and reactive." The reader re-creates or re-authors the text she reads. "Reading" here is understood primarily in reference to a transformative process inhabiting the trajectory of a *contemplatio* that is more of a reading of the reader *by* the text, an experience of being grasped by what is ungraspable, pulled into it in the form of longing.

Everything the reader brings to the reading of the text becomes part and parcel of a unique reading experience, a unique encounter with a unique text, since no text is ever the same text.

"Moving away from a passive, mechanical text-reception model, we have come to recognize the ways in which reading overflows itself in all directions and at every moment. The process begins with expectations and predictions that precede contact with the text; it proceeds through the perception of letters and words, continues through the visualizations, inferences, and syntheses that orchestrate comprehension, and, at last, quite possibly takes leave of the written page altogether. Reading is surrounded always by an extratextual, experiential context, an aura integral to the essence of the act. In this concentric zone is located the creativity of the reader's response, his or her contribution to creating the text that is read, and also the conditioning, virtual presence of other readers—the 'interpretive community,' or, in medieval culture, the church—with whom the reader remains in constant communion."



## 28.

# Acting Without Acting

The Sage is occupied with the unspoken  
and acts without effort (wu wei).

Teaching without verbosity,  
producing without possessing,  
creating without regard to result,  
claiming nothing,  
the Sage has nothing to lose.

*From Tao Te Ching*

All through elementary and high school I was something of a 'problem' student. I didn't like being told what to do and had a negative attitude toward authority figures in general. Consequently, I was always in trouble. My arrogant and rebellious attitude reached a climax in my freshman year at college.

After high school I left home to attend university. Contrary to school policy, I moved into an off-campus apartment with a couple of high school buddies. Much of my first collegiate year was spent experimenting with newfound freedoms and cutting a lot of classes to do so. I'll skip the details. It ended rather badly. Following a stormy disagreement with the Dean about the cause of my ultra-low GPA, I was politely asked to leave school.

After working in the advertising industry for a year, I returned to school with a fresh attitude and determination to

graduate. There was a new Dean and he let me be flexible with the required curriculum. And then a big breakthrough occurred for me in an Introduction to Philosophy course.

To my surprise, I felt immediately at home among the ancient philosophers whose works I read. I could hear their voices as if they were speaking aloud to me. I loved their questioning of authority and exposing of false ideas in a dedicated search for truth, goodness, and beauty. Philosophy helped me to see the joy of pursuing knowledge for the sake of wisdom, self-development, and living the best possible life. I couldn't get enough of it. I agreed with Aristotle that philosophy was the best possible way of life.

In contrast to my newfound love of learning, I disliked feeling forced to study specifically for exams. Yet, I helplessly fell into that trap. Everyone did. It was like a mass hypnosis! Your status as a person seemed to rest on your GPA. From that perspective, the whole reason to study is to get good grades. That is *performance consciousness*.

Exam-taking had always been a source of anxiety for me. If I did well, I thought I was smart and felt good about that. But when I did not do well, I felt inept and stupid. I worried that I was not intelligent enough to be a philosopher, despite loving it. Studying so many brilliant thinkers was intimidating. Grade-consciousness added to performance-anxiety and intellectual self-esteem issues only made exam-taking worse.

Meanwhile, I had taken a course in Eastern Philosophy where I learned about the Taoist principle of *wu wei*, often translated as

“doing by not doing” or “acting without effort,” as in the epigraph above. According to this idea, it is best not to focus on trying to produce outcomes directly. Better to focus only on the meaningfulness of the process itself, the Tao, and go with the flow. If your focus on Tao is true, you can be certain that outcomes will be beneficial.

I decided to practice the *wu wei* approach and see what happened. What really mattered to me, I thought, was how much I really enjoyed learning about philosophy, psychology, history, and other subjects. It was intrinsically rewarding. So, I worked to let go of caring about how someone else judged this love of mine. I stopped worrying about grades altogether. I focused exclusively on doing what I loved doing, which had nothing to do with grades. I then found myself feeling much better about studying because it was clear in my mind that I was doing it for the sake of learning and cultivating my knowledge base, and not for the sake of getting a grade. That is *mastery consciousness*.

No sooner did I stop caring about the grades I got for doing what I loved than the good grades came rolling in. I became a straight “A” student and was consistently on the Dean’s List after that. It took some effort not to let that define me or undermine my love of learning. But no more test anxiety! Exams worked for me now. They were an opportunity to show off my learning, to see what I could do, to get feedback. I learned to relax and enjoy the challenge and have fun with them and see them as desirable

exercises. Now I was in charge of the test-taking rather than being victimized by it.

This success as an undergraduate student would stay with me through two masters' degrees and a Ph.D. where I was consistently at the top of my class, without really caring too much about that competitive success because I had continued doing what I really loved to do, what felt like my 'calling'. That is what is important to me. Pursuing that love is wholly under my control, so I can nurture and cultivate it, and live it as a way of life. Thus, the principle of *wu wei* became a life principle for me that has consistently resulted in success without really trying to achieve success or caring one way or another about it. Success is never final, and failure is never fatal, as my dear old dad used to say.

Doing something because you love doing it and believe it is worthwhile is focusing on life-changing mastery rather than mere performance. It is focusing more on process than outcome and is more in harmony with the flow of Tao. Being motivated by a higher purpose, such as the mastery of your craft while living in harmony with nature, will bring success more certainly than if you focus on trying to make that success happen itself.

That is the lesson of *wu wei* as I learned it.

## 29.

# Figuring-Out Versus Contemplation

Here are six fundamental dimensions of human life that are impossible to know comprehensibly or to explain absolutely with rational certitude:

- 1. The nature and existence of God**
- 2. Whether human beings have free will**
- 3. The nature and existence of the self or soul and whether it is immortal**
- 4. The existence of a material, three-dimensional world apart from consciousness**
- 5. How it came to be that there is something rather than nothing**
- 6. The origin of conscious, rational, value-oriented, self-aware human life**

Over the course of thousands of years, many thinkers from East and West have tried to determine final answers or explanations for these mysteries, yet none have succeeded with unquestionable certitude. This failure of rational thought does not mean that thinking about these questions should be abandoned or that they are somehow meaningless because thinking cannot

explain or determine final answers for them. Rather, such a failure of thinking indicates that trying to figure-out or explain these mysteries once and for all is simply the wrong approach to them.

The true value of these utterly mysterious dimensions of human life is precisely the fact that they are *mysteries*, that is, exactly what cannot be known with absolute certitude through rational, scientific inquiry. From this perspective, contemplation without ultimate fulfillment in understanding these mysteries, rather than “figuring them out,” may be a more meaningful approach.

Unlike figuring-out which seeks to arrive at a final, authoritative, and in some sense ‘correct’ delineation, explanation, or answer for these and other mysteries of human life once and for all—mistakenly presupposing or understanding them as questions to be answered or problems to be solved—contemplation seeks only to see, appreciate, and be enlightened by the unfolding, blossoming or showing-itself-from-itself of the mysteriousness of these mysteries, the ways in which they infinitely resist the grasping hand of representational thought.

From the perspective of figuring out, the goal of inquiry is to end or overcome the mysteriousness of these mysteries and to replace the mystery with grasped, comprehensible knowledge forced to stand still and be objective, be a something. From the perspective of contemplation, on the other hand, the goal is to let the mysteries show themselves *as* mysteries in ever greater depth and profundity of their own natural flow.

Whereas figuring-out inevitably results in the dead-end frustration of the desired satisfaction, the end of contemplation is joyful enlightenment without satisfaction, an infinite unendingness, which is the only kind of infinity that there is. Enlightenment is living in the incomprehensible, overflowing fullness of being human at every instant without knowing it. Such fullness is an irreducible, inscrutable, inexpressible, open-ended process rather than a destination, a lived knowledge rather than a representable knowledge.

"Figuring out" is the clumsy grasping of the earnest but callow lover. "Contemplation" is openness to being grasped by the infinite fullness of love.

## 30.

# Consciousness and the Origin of Life

Had a pleasant lunch yesterday with my old friend, BF, a retired clinical pathologist. We met up downtown at the Back Door Cafe. He is working on a theosophical paper that focuses on the interweaving complexities of the Biology, Cosmology, Quantum Theory nexus which, he believes, reveals God in some mystical way...for those who have eyes to see. If you look at the developing complexity and implausible balance and fine tuning of the necessary requirements for human life, how can you not believe in God, BF asks? Something like that.

Belief or non-belief in God seems to be already derivative of something more elemental and inexpressible, something that is suggested as much in saying "I believe in *God*" as in saying "I don't believe in *God*." Notice how God is included in both of those sentences. And here is something that often goes unnoticed about so-called atheists. Belief or non-belief in God is on par with the scientific, physicalist belief that there is a three-dimensional material reality existing apart from consciousness, which cannot be

known with certitude, and thus requires an unabashed leap of faith which is thoughtlessly made by many self-proclaimed atheistic scientific physicalists. Ironic, those faithless 'atheists' who claim to be faithful 'realists'.

Listening to BF talk energetically (his ancient bright eyes blazing) about life and death got me thinking about the origin of life and the mystery of consciousness again. Everyone these days is looking for a theory that will explain consciousness, that will define it adequately. Many believe that consciousness arises from the complexity of brain processes. Brain activity produces consciousness. Okay, but what produces brain activity? A brain cannot just start its own electrical activity, its own signaling, or whatever it is thought to do. How does it start? Does it start before consciousness observes it? And, of course, there is the question of how an infinitely rich subjective experience arises or emerges from the electrical impulses of non-conscious tissue, something that is far from demonstrated to anyone's satisfaction. Thus, has arisen the 21<sup>st</sup> century problem of consciousness and the origin of life.

Obviously, every life begins from already living germ cells, the sperm and the egg that come together (as if by magic) to begin forming the human being, as if totally by magic. The earliest known life-forms on Earth are putative fossilized microorganisms, found in hydrothermal vent precipitates, that may have lived as early as 4.28 billion years ago, relatively soon after the oceans formed 4.41 billion years ago, and not long after the formation of the Earth 4.54 billion years ago. Living human substance is miraculously passed

on from two human beings to another new human being. Been doing that for a long time. It is from this living substance that all brain activity is formed. And, thus, it finally comes back to the question of how this living substance itself was formed in the first place. I do not see any possibility that non-living stuff somehow produced living stuff from a cauldron of random chemical activity around hydrothermal vents. Good luck with demonstrating that, you mad chemists! A brain sitting there on a slab will never be able to turn itself on. Do not bother waiting up. Something out there got life going. It wasn't a random, accidental, or contingent event. Somehow self-referential consciousness got turned on in the flesh. It didn't just suddenly bring that about itself.

Everyone's world is 'made up of' nothing but conscious perceptions. My world does not seem to exist when I am unconscious. Descartes was right. He just didn't know how right he was. There is no reasonable naturalistic explanation for how self-replicating, living, organic substance first occurred on earth, especially considering how this supposedly happened before anyone was around to observe it. What about the fossil record? The fossil record demonstrates only that there are some found-looking objects that we have determined constitute a "fossil record" due to certain observable characteristics of the fossils. That doesn't get us passed our prison of immediate consciousness. A fossil does not guarantee objectively that there was anything existing prior to the consciousness of the so-called fossil that I am perceiving, not even the fossil itself.

Everything is necessarily *within* consciousness. My consciousness *is* everything that I am conscious of. The question “Which is more primordial, life or consciousness?” is a kind of chicken or the egg question, worthless because unanswerable. Consciousness is life; life is consciousness. You cannot have one without the other. Life has only been “life” since some consciousness was conscious of there being life, of life “being-there” (*Dasein*) for a consciousness that names and creates the great story of being. Consciousness is elemental.

Perhaps God is pure consciousness and the origin of all consciousness manifesting as a kind of pan-psychic pantheism where everything is sacred and the many are one.

## 31.

# Astonishment and the Veil of Isis

An astonishing read last night from Pierre Hadot's *Veil of Isis* regarding Goethe and the *Urphanomen* understood as the essential mystery of nature that is "hiding in plain sight" right before our eyes ... if we have eyes to see.

This section of Hadot's remarkable text reminded me of Edmund Husserl's idea of how *urphanomena*--originary events-- can be 'grasped' through an act of primal intuition by the transcendental ego. Or, so Husserl thought in his early transcendental period.

Goethe's idea is that *urphanomena* cannot be grasped cognitively because they are fundamental mysteries of nature which, because they are just there "in plain sight," that is, given in their pure originality appearing there before us, that we tend to look right through them into the abyss of some overarching schema. This is what is reflected in Husserl's often repeated motto: "back to the things themselves," back to the originary way in which phenomena come to appear or are given to us in consciousness.

*Urphanomena* illuminate other phenomena but in themselves cannot be grasped or further explored 'as they are'. To 'know' them is to be grasped by them, to be caught up in their appearing. Thus, the only proper attitude before the coming to appearance of such originary phenomena is astonishment or awe, or perhaps a variant of what Aristotle referred to as "wonder;" astonishment before the mystery with a kind of prayerful reverence. The awe-fulness of originary phenomena, the way in which pure reality surges forth as if from nowhere into the mundane appearances of everyday conscious experience, brings with it or overflows into the insightful consciousness as overwhelming joy that mostly wants to pour out in songful prayers of adoration and shouts of joy--what must have led David to rapturous dancing and singing before the Holy of Holies.

Goethe's insight certainly has theological implications and ramifications. The Incarnation of Jesus is an *urphanomenon*, an originary or fundamental phenomenon in the face of which the only proper attitude is awestruck astonishment expressed in prayers of joyful adoration. There is no grasping this. It clearly grasps us, if we let it. One must be open to being grasped by fundamental mystery; one must be available to originary mystery. The proper attitude is required or the revelation will not occur.

Here is where the practice of seeing comes into play. Of course, disbelief is always possible, just as it is possible to annihilate the face that pleads the unspoken command "Do not kill

me!" Yet disbelief is only possible because belief is possible first.  
Take your pick!

Everyone thinks that they can see just fine and so they fail to see that they do not see things as they are just because they believe that they can see just fine. Thus, they do not develop their seeing beyond the conventional blindness that most people simply believe is factually and objectively given...normal, 'proper' seeing. As Plato mused, the great mass of people sleep-walk through their day.

Education ought to awaken us to our need to develop our seeing beyond what is conventionally approved for us to see, so that we see that we don't see and thus might be opened to the possibility of a fleeting glimpse of a seeing that astonishes. First, however, the aspirant must unlearn the comforting delusion of ignorance. For, as Epictetus said, nobody can be taught that which they already think they know.

## 32.

### No Me ... No World ... No Anything

The everyday world that I ordinarily experience and everything about that world is contingent. Contingent here means that something is dependent on something other than itself for itself. My world, as experienced, is the constituted correlate formed by my subjective consciousness out of the pure but imperceptible givenness of my world beforehand. Yet, it appears to me as an independently real world, having an existence separate from and not contingent upon my perception of it, a separate space that I am moving my body through.

I also have an idea of the non-contingent, a conceptual deconstruction that overflows the very boundaries I need to even approach thinking such an idea. So, I shouldn't say "I have such an idea" since it is more that I am grasped by the idea of the non-contingent than that I could ever grasp it. Out of the non-contingent, my conscious perceptual experience is constituted as "my world."

The reduction *from* the belief that a three-dimensional, material world exists apart from my consciousness of it or any

consciousness of it, and then a further reduction *to* the belief that my experience is constituted as phenomena or how things appear to me in my conscious perceptions, the appearing of those things to me ... together these two attitudinal 'moves' constitute the initial steps of the phenomenological reduction as a practice or method. "My world" is now 'reduced' to a phenomenal world, a world of appearances-to-consciousness.

It is sometimes remarked what a good fit we humans are for our earth world since if our world were to change in ever so small a way, human life would not be possible. We should not be surprised by that. Why? Because we are beings *of* our world and are not merely *on* or *in* our world. I am my world become conscious and becoming conscious of itself as "my" world. I am 'the' world (as "my world") growing up, becoming responsible, reflecting on itself. I fit my world perfectly because I am a perfect 'product' of my world, necessary for me to even have a world. Hard to say which comes first. I am the subjective counterpart of the objective world appearing to me subjectively as "my world." I am my world. Ultimately, I and the cosmos are one. Spatial and temporal separateness is a necessary illusion for my world to appear as a world.

It is not as if I just wandered into my world from nowhere, out of nothing, as if this world existed and then I happened along and carved out a portion of the world-at-large into "my world." No. I was born here out of what is here, born of the earth through a woman. I am earthling, of the earth. I am the world (nature) coming

to know itself consciously for me as “my world” (the only world there is) – the self-consciousness of the world. I am not accidental to the world, not alien. I am not apart from the world but am thoroughly *of the world* that I am simultaneously constituting.

Apart from my consciousness of my world there is nothing since my consciousness of world is exactly and completely the way in which I fit in with the world experienced as “my world” and nothing other. Thus, no me, no world, no nothing. Or, to say that another way, everything is one on the other side, prior to space, time, and understanding, prior to being here.

# 33.

## Let There Be Light

I constitute or configure my world preconsciously into conscious perceptions of phenomena 'out of' the imperceptible given prior to consciousness, my little light emerging from a field of unknowable darkness. Beginning from me, as if saying for the first time "Let there be light," my world becomes immediately everything I am conscious of insofar as I am conscious of it, the totality of 'lit-up' phenomena of my everyday perceptual experience, sights, sounds, tastes, smells, touching and being touched. This lighting-up or coming into a clearing is the origin of my world. My world is an invitation, a gift, an openness into the co-creative work of a God I know but cannot comprehend, the origin of life, world, reason, value, and consciousness.

Everyone has a world and no two worlds are alike, as with snowflakes, raindrops, and leaves. The structuring and deployment of my world can overlap with other personal worlds to some extent but it never exactly or completely lines up with any other world. My world has invisible boundaries by which I can see and move out of and into the worlds of others and they can see and move into and out of my world, although nobody else can perceive or experience my world as my world is for me, nor can I perceive

anyone else's world as it is for them. At best, others must make an inductive, analogical leap from partial, circumstantial evidence to get to a sense of what my world is like for me and for me to get a sense of what their world is like for them. Individual consciousnesses constructing originary "my world(s)" out of consciousness while simultaneously merging them or melding them with other worlds within some larger meaningful collective construction is what gives us the sense of having or being in a common world ... which, paradoxically, we are and are not. There is no "the world" as it is in itself and for itself to be found anywhere, only *my* world and *your* world, from which we may construct *our* world. Perhaps all worlds are encompassed by God's world in some way we cannot understand but can nevertheless think about.

Worlding can be thought to be happening "in" God and God can be thought as "in" all that is happening. God is "in" everyone's world and everyone's world is "in" God. That little word "in" conveys the sense of being close to God, being with God in a special, intimate, and loving way. There is a sense of proximity in this term, in being not *far* from God. God is *close* at hand. That is how it feels, even though I cannot say exactly how it is that God is in some sense "close" to me, but that does feel like the right way to describe my experience poetically, which is also a way of knowing. Close is warm and safe. Far is cold and distant. What we come to know of others must cross these bridges of metaphor.

How, then, is God in me? The way in which God is in me, or I am in God, or my world is in God, or God is in my world with me...is

as a non-material, spiritual manifestation that is prior to space, time, and representable understanding—all of which are the necessary conditions for me to have any kind of experience at all, according to Kant. From this perspective ‘being in’ seems to arise before the possibility of being that which could in any sense be in something else or not. Thus, I feel the mysterious term “in” (the ‘in’ that is prior to every being “in”) is very important, even central, to my ‘relationship’ with God, even though I cannot discursively explain in propositional language the full meaning of it and must use temporal and spatial metaphors to try to explain what is beyond being ‘captured’ or allowed to reveal itself fully by those metaphors. I am in God. God is in me. I am not God, of course. And God is not me. Yet, while separate, we are nevertheless, paradoxically, one. Another one of those human mysteries, like the insatiable yearning for God that I find in me and could not have put there.

Perhaps the word “in” signifies something like the way in which the butterfly is ‘in’ the caterpillar. Not as a mere potentiality or possibility but as always already actively engaged in being such, insofar as the caterpillar could not be what it is now without the butterfly being precursory in it as an already actualized or actualizing potential, without that potentiality being in it contributing to it being who it is now, indeed, making it who it is. I am only who I am now because God is in me, and I am in God. Yes, that sounds right. Outside of that is hell, which is not being with God at all, and which, in truth, is no outside at all, a ‘something’ that

'is' nothing. Hell could not be something. It is less than nothing, worse than nothing, the wrong end of the unspeakable. We can't comprehend hell with our metaphors of hell any more than we can comprehend the fullness of heaven or God...until we get 'there'.

So, it must be that our collective nature, our sociality, our ordinary need to live and be constituted collectively, individually as part of a group, stems from the fact that all individual worlds are unified in one world, one consciousness from which all specific worlds are derivative. That one world is God's world. In God, we all live in one world; the many becomes the one and the one many, just like that. Without God as ultimate guarantor, the unity of being would be impossible.

It is as if my individual spark of consciousness by which I create my world is a direct, familial share in God's being, in God's consciousness ...by virtue of my being a child of God and thus God's heir, as in some sense of those metaphors. God is now, this very moment, seeing the world through my eyes. God also sees the world at every instant through the eyes and mind and soul of everyone, every other individual consciousness that exists, ever existed, or will exist. We cannot imagine how it is for God even when we articulate the bare bones of possibility. All individual consciousnesses are unified in and originate from God consciousness, the way all things mortal are unified in the immortal. God is *Abgrund* ... the unspeakable, unconditional, undeconstructible foundation of the ground of light itself, the

foundation of all appearing and worlding, the necessary condition for there being something rather than nothing.

That is how all things become possible, then, through the speaking of the word, the saying of the said establishing being, what is, opening-up a world. Only those who can enter into saying understood as truth speaking can hope to come to be finally said themselves, can hope to come to be at all, insofar as that is possible, within the unifying principle of the immortal.

V.

*BEYOND THE WAY*

## 34.

# Appearances, Illusions, God

Heraclitus was fond of saying that everything which comes into 'being' is always already on its way out of being, if not already gone. Nothing that comes to 'be' ever truly arrives at its destination, never actually achieves being. I mean fully be-ing, a steadfast and unchanging being. But being is already gone before it has gotten here, there, or anywhere as "this" or "that" being. Being has already escaped the scene, leaving only a trace of its former self. That is perhaps the first and most fundamental of all illusions, the illusion of the Being of beings. Martin Heidegger went looking for the Being of beings but, of course, he failed to find it—a *felix culpa* since what he was really looking for was 'found' in his failure to find it.

Change is deterioration and dispersal toward the anonymity of non-being or no-thing-ness, toward what is not nothing but not yet something either, the indeterminate and amorphous, the non-descript, the relentlessly otherwise, the anonymous. All being tends toward and embraces non-being like the ouroboric snake biting its tail, endures it already at every instant and not merely as the yet-to-come. Being and no-thing-ness are two sides of the same

coin, as Plato suggested in *The Sophist*, which is nevertheless an illusory and misleading metaphor, a double-edged sword, like all stories, inescapably misleading, even as it speaks truthfully.

Yet, against all odds and all predictability, there is in this illusory, phenomenal body of mine, a fire burning that I did not set, a self-moving determination that I am unable to domesticate. It is thinking, loving, desiring, confabulating life and re-creating itself indefinitely...brain, heart, guts, gonads, whole body burning collectively with a fire of longing, a great and insatiable longing for what is beyond the here and now, a longing for what is Forever and ever. It is a longing that is at once and impossibly both suffering and bliss.

All appearances are illusory filaments of what we refer to as consciousness. They are not what they seem to be. They are not what the appearance supposedly represents and gives up so readily in the guise of the thing itself. Appearances of things, phenomena, do not really 'have' any substantial being since the 'being' of all appearances is becoming non-being. You can say "being," but the being of appearances 'is', in truth, more of a perpetual transitioning, an always blowing away like autumnal leaves down the street without end. Being perpetually becomes otherwise. Think about being and not-being. But you can't, except as a mere formalism. Like trying to think black and white together, an impossibility ending up with only a gray mess of indecipherable nonsense. The abyss of being becoming non-being and back again

is like that. It is a black hole of illusions that itself resists comprehension while it sucks everything that “is” into it.

It appears that the sun is moving across the sky.

It appears that the earth is flat and still.

It appears that material things are solid.

It appears that we are identical with ourselves.

It appears that there is a three-dimensional, material world  
that exists apart from my consciousness.

It appears that we understand things we say.

Yet, so much of reality is not what it appears to be. That is the great enlightenment. When it grasps you, it will unhinge you and set you free, if you let it. Appearances of one kind or another—always presupposing a human observer—and which are all we have for weaving our worldly reality, are nevertheless all illusory phenomena, just as classical phenomenology teaches, the first ‘positioning’ of what appears to consciousness, of what could possibly appear. Reality is a shadow-play of appearances dancing and cavorting to the tune of my expectant, constitutive, thrown perceptions.

If there is anything behind appearances, it cannot be known through and by other appearances. What appears like solid materiality in the form of this desk I am working on, then, is closer to a quantum spiritual kind of probable ‘being’, unstable and transitioning, like flimsy fingers of incense stretching toward the sacred, brought to ‘be’ only by its being perceived. Finally, it must be God’s consciousness, in which we have a share, as do all things,

that holds everything in being absolutely, the Absolute Observer. That would answer the question of whether what I perceive continues to exist when I am not perceiving it. To be is to be perceived, as Berkeley taught. In that wholly illusory space, my illusory self is nevertheless given immediately to itself. That alone is an awesome and momentous discovery, that I find myself *here!* That I *am* at all, in any sense! That, paradoxically, I both am who I am and am not who I am at the same time! That I appear to *be* though I never achieve being! That I seem to be processing or transitioning, living-dying all at once, hoping that there will be some residue, some remainder that survives the final transubstantiation of the flesh, some part of 'me' that does not evaporate completely into an indefinite and anonymous *apeiron*. Something of me that rises from the ashes of death's defeat like the proverbial albatross....

That is what Christians believe, isn't it? Called to follow Christ up the hill of that awful lifetime to the cross of self-sacrifice, a life lived wholly for the good of others? Followers of the One, Universal Christ believe they will rise from the dead with Him, immortal diamond. In and by the Cosmic Christ there is eternal life. But first you must find your way through the desolate land of shadows and the treacherous veil of illusions that will block your way. The earthly Jesus can be helpful with that journey on the road to Forever.

Appearances are not random or haphazard. They are ordered. Thus, there must be an ordering principle. Ultimately,

only a God-principle could be the ordering principle of the appearances that we call reality, a God-principle that is beyond our ability to comprehend reflectively and is not grasped or adequately represented in and by the word "God" or its synonyms, written or spoken. Even to guess at. What a joke! God comes and grabs us if we are ready and willing...or nothing. You can't storm the gates of heaven. And when God comes calling, you will know it.

I have some idea of "God" in my mind, but it is precisely an idea of that about which I cannot possibly have an idea at all, contrary to Descartes. That alone, when you try to think it, is totally weird and should wake you up! God's absolute, alpha and omega consciousness which we cannot comprehend, brings all appearances into being and holds them in being as they transition out of being into the abyss of anonymity and back again, having never really been in the first place or having always been in the mind of God in a way we cannot grasp. Maybe there is an Eternal Return. Maybe there isn't. What difference would it make in the always-more framework of Forever. In short, reality is weird. It is otherwise than it appears, as if that were an essential feature.

What is other is that which I cannot reduce to an idea in my mind, cannot represent to myself what it is like to be other. What is other is what I cannot comprehend yet what I can know without grasping because somehow, as if by magic, it can grasp me and move me to respond without causing me to respond, fire up a longing to respond. It is what always remains beyond me, a stranger to my mind, a homeless mystery looking for a bed for the

night. Either I am grasped by the otherness of the Ultimate Other, by God in the Spirit, by Jesus ... or nothing.

What is other does not come into the comprehension of the same, despite attempts at such a reduction. The same is that which is identical with itself, what has an identity; like 'me myself', like what 'something' is thought to be. To have an identity means that something remains the same with itself, remains paradoxically identical with itself through change. The other, on the other hand, is that which resists being pulled into the identity of the sameness of the same. It defiantly remains other. Here is the basis of all reality illusions, the 'production' of all fleeting appearances ... and all appearances are fleeting.

The moral of the story: By its very nature, the otherness of the other is always just out of reach, just beyond my grasp, always transitioning. The illusory appearance of that originary uniqueness that is the otherness of the other in my world seems to say: "Do not reduce me to the identity of the same." Do not reduce me to an idea in your mind by which you think you know me, think you comprehend me, believe you have grasped me or, worse, figured me out. In other words, do not kill me! Thus, if you think you have met the Buddha on the road, kill him.

Throughout it all, God, who is not God but always more than God, remains the improbable and ungraspable presence of the other in the same, grasping us before we know it, calling us into life, as it were, making it all possible. Beyond weird. Another way to say it is that God and Forever have everything in common.

# 35.

## Faith, Doubt, Consciousness

What is faith?

According to the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, faith is holding to a belief with passionate conviction in the face of objective uncertainty about what is believed. Engaging in such an act of faith is ridiculed by atheists like Richard Dworkin because it violates the principle of sufficient reason, so beloved by realists, since, by definition, there is no sufficient reason for an act of faith.

But such a realist objection to faith is disingenuous. Realists and reductive physicalists like Dworkin, subscribe to the objectively uncertain belief that there is a three-dimensional material world that exists independent of anyone's conscious perception of it, as if that belief were a simple, clear-cut, *given* fact that required no justification. But let us look closer.

The realist belief in the existence of an objective, material world apart from perception is as objectively uncertain and unprovable as the belief in the existence of a transcendent God. In other words, it is an act of faith held with passionate conviction in the face of objective uncertainty due to insufficient evidence. Appearances cannot themselves be evidence for the existence of what appears or would appear beyond appearances, what the appearances are appearances of, so to speak, since that would beg

the question by assuming what needs to be proven. What appears *to us* does not give us, *in itself and as it is*, what the appearances are appearances of. Dworkin is a man of faith after all!

Appearances are perceptual experiences that require a perceiver who 'has' those experiences or is embedded in them, or both. The experiences are entirely "in" the subjective consciousness of the perceiver. Where else could they be? Thus, it requires a leap of faith to hold that our experience of appearances demonstrates the real existence of those things represented by the appearances apart from the perception of them. Clearly, atheists, like theists, are people of deep faith, albeit aimed in (supposedly) different directions.

The realist or physicalist might counter the skeptic's argument by asserting that there is some circumstantially reasonable, though not certain, evidence for believing in a three-dimensional world apart from perception. But that argument would also hold for the theist since there is also "reasonable" evidence to support the existence of God. Consider the fine-tuning argument, for example. God is a reasonable condition for the possibility of having any experience at all, including the experience of appearances. The long and unfinished history of idealism supports such a reasonable claim, a claim that is at least equally as reasonable as the physicalist claim.

Also, it should be noted that faith goes beyond these overarching metaphysical questions. We engage in an act of faith every time we sit down in a chair, for example. We cannot be

absolutely certain that the chair will support us since inductive reasoning from experience only produces probabilities. The probabilities may be very high that the chair will support us once again, but, still, an act of faith is required in the face of that insurmountable probabilism, however tacit.

I engage myself in a compact of faith when my friend says she will meet me at the café on Wednesday at noon or when I engage in almost any action in my daily life. Having faith that my car will start when I turn the key, that fresh water will gush from the faucet when I turn the handle, that I will wake up in the morning after going to sleep...all of these acts of faith indicate that faith is the bedrock of all my conscious experience and a fundamental requirement of lived life. Faith, not certainty. It would be impossible to live my life based on rational, scientific certainty. We would never get anywhere. There are very few things, if anything, about which we have certitude. Faith is the order of the day for realists and idealists alike, whether they like it or not, whether they pretend otherwise.

These arguments carry over into considerations about the origin and nature of consciousness. We live in a world of which we are conscious and have no consciousness of anything existing beyond the world of which we are conscious. Consciousness is the elemental structure of our entire experiential reality. If it may be produced by something other than itself, we are not conscious of what that "something other" might be.

We do not produce consciousness. For this to be the case it would be necessary for consciousness to emerge from non-

consciousness or for there to be some form of eternal consciousness. And I would have to be before I am conscious of being, an impossibility. There is a substantial difference between consciousness and non-consciousness. I have an immediate, conscious experience of being conscious, but I have no conscious experience of being not conscious. Not-conscious will never exist for me. I will never know that I am dead. When I sleep or am anesthetized, that 'time' is like a black hole in my historical conscious perception, an empty, nonexistent nothing in my stream of subjective consciousness that will never be filled. It is as if my world was sucked into the abyss during that time in which I did not exist for myself. The fact that the hands of the clock have changed their position during such a 'time' that did not exist for me, or that other people report having conscious experiences of "me" while I slept (testimony that I would have to accept on faith because even a video of me there on the bed apparently unconscious would not be sufficient to prove to myself that I actually existed subjectively for myself when I have no conscious experience of that, and a video record wouldn't fill that vacant hole), does nothing to make *me* conscious of what happened during my unconsciousness, which just doesn't exist for me. For me, that 'time' and 'space' will never exist. I was as good as dead.

The only world we 'have' is the world of which we are conscious, and the only substance that this world has, as far as we can know, is the elemental substance of consciousness. I do not need to have faith that I am conscious since my consciousness is

the only thing of which I am immediately certain. Thank you, Descartes. Everything else requires an act of faith.

Thus, to the extent that there is a world that appears to consciousness, a consciousness that perceives that world is a necessary condition for its possibility. It could not be human consciousness since human consciousness is subject to the possibility of unconsciousness in which nothing exists, like when I am anaesthetized. A consciousness that is *never* unconscious is necessary for the continuity of 'there being' a common world. Such an eternal consciousness could reasonably be called "God," for lack of a better and more comprehensive word, which we do not have.

Such a God's eternal conscious perception of the world would be the *sine qua non* for what brings that world into existence and holds it in existence. If God were not conscious of the world at every instant, the world, reality, would cease to be. That position is reflected in the work of idealist philosophers from Plato to Berkeley. As Nicolas Malebranche put it, "we see all things in the mind of God."

## 36.

# God's Gender

Consider St. Anselm's assertion that God is "that than which nothing greater can be thought." From Anselm's ontological perspective, that God would have a gender seems to make no sense since God could not have that kind of particularity, or any particularity for that matter, and still be that than which nothing greater could be thought, especially as the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

You cannot be "this" or "that" and be "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28) at the same time. What kind of God would that be? If God were male, then God would not be female. If God were white, God would not be black. But, since God, as St. Anselm depicts God, lacks nothing and is always greater than can be thought, that cannot be right.

Perhaps God cannot properly be said "to be" at all. To be implies being *this* and, thus, not *that*. Categories of being make no sense regarding God and cannot properly apply to God, despite centuries of God-talk suggesting the contrary. God is beyond being and all conceptual grasping. God is prior to being. Like Plato's "Good." The verb "to be" is essential to our human ability to say anything about anything, but it also indicates a limitation on the

possibilities of language, since it is a truism that language cannot say what cannot be said.

Furthermore, to say that God exists or does not exist makes no sense regarding God since God is not "a being" who could either exist or not exist. God is beyond being and non-being. We should stop thinking and talking about God anthropomorphically in human-oriented terms. The claim about the limitation of what can be positively asserted about God is the foundation of the "*via negativa*" or apophatic approach to God-talk. According to the strictures of the *via negativa*, we cannot predicate anything meaningfully about God. Yet we can love what we cannot know because 'it' is beyond our ability to comprehend using rational words and concepts in propositional form. We cannot know God or comprehend God. But we can love God. Before we are knowers, we are lovers. As knowers, we are unknown to ourselves, as Nietzsche pointed out. As lovers, however, knower and known are always one.

Jesus used a lot of metaphors to convey his teachings. Metaphors are a kind of analogy that indicate what something is like, not what something is. Metaphorical analogies are illustrative but do not prove anything. Jesus referred to himself as "a gate" but, of course, he was not literally a gate. Nor was he a shepherd, bread, lamb, 'Son of Man', or any of the other metaphors he used to suggest and express who he was or what he was about. Yet, these metaphors are highly suggestive.

Jesus said, for example, that he and the Father are one. He did not mean this numerically since that would be incomprehensible. Jesus and his “father” are metaphorically one or one in a way that we cannot rationally comprehend, like (metaphorically speaking) the way a well-married husband and wife might consider themselves to be “joined at the hip.” This means they are “very close” or “in sync”—but not identical, not physically conjoined, yet still one. We cannot ultimately comprehend the meaningfulness of God. But where understanding stops, love begins.

I am in love with God, but not with a “father” God or a gate or a mustard seed or a shepherd. I am in love with a Beloved or Lover God. God is my Beloved. I can imagine Her as female, the Goddess, if I imagine Her at all, sublimely beautiful and beyond compare. I don't think God *is* female, but just as the metaphorical use of the father relation was helpful to the hearers of Jesus' message, the beloved female metaphor for God allows me to experience how I can adore God, worship God, want only to be with God, want to devote all of my life to God, want to be one with God, want to please God in everything I say at every moment of the day, want never to offend God, consider God my Significant Other, etc. ... because that is how I feel about my most perfect Beloved, my Beloved of beloveds who is that than which no greater beloved could be thought or imagined. I love Her to the max. I believe She/He loves me unconditionally. I would readily die for Her/Him. I feel a passionate love for the Goddess/God who moves me.

And while we're on the topic of metaphorical and anthropocentric God predication, let me just add that I think of Jesus as my big Brother. Why not? He is the big brother I would always wanted, an ideal big brother I could worship, adore, and imitate. I mean, my big Brother walks on water! I idolize him to the max. Of course, I want to be just like him. I want to follow in his footsteps, to imitate him, his Way, though I know I could never come close. I love him wholeheartedly. I worship the ground he walks on. My hero! I confess to being a typical idolizing little brother. I can access this kind of affect when I think of Jesus *as* my divine Brother, although we are not related by blood. Well, maybe, sort of....

There, then, in the affective realm of love...in the realm of the heart, Dear Reader, lies the power, beauty, and meaningfulness of metaphorical bridges to the sacred, metaphorical stories that show us the way, the truth, and the light.

## 37.

# Aligning my Will with God's Will

By his willingness to undergo the agony of crucifixion, Jesus of Galilee both teaches and demonstrates that we are to align our will with the will of God. *Prima facie*, that would mean that we are to do what God wants us to do rather than doing what we want to do. And that means we need to discern what God's will is for us. We can conclude from the Gospel account that it was not the personal choice of Jesus of Galilee to undergo crucifixion. If it could be avoided, he would not mind, he asks his Father. But this is what God wanted him to do, we are told. So, putting his own will second to God's will, aligning it with God's will, Jesus allowed himself to be crucified. Not my will, but Your will be done.

This story, which is central to Christianity, involves a few presumptions. First, it presumes the existence of "free will" rather than determinism. The question of determinism is not even considered. It is assumed that Jesus exercised "free" will by choosing to accept God's will, even though he himself was God incarnate. Presumably, he could have chosen otherwise, although being able to choose otherwise can never be proven. Secondly, there is the presumption that God's will can be known and

distinguished, more or less clearly, from our personal will. Yet, I wonder how, exactly, Jesus knew that it was God's will that he be crucified and not, say, his own pathological projection? Only by prayer, deep faith, and practicing what he preached. Third, it is presumed that what "the will" is does not require any determination. Yet, we can ask: Is "the will" a faculty? Yes, you say? But then, what is a faculty? Is "our will" under our control? How free is it? What about situational influences? And so forth. Considering these presuppositions existentially, I am left wondering what it means, exactly, for me to align my will with God's will.

The relation between "my will" and "God's will" makes the most sense to me when I think of it, not as an abstract philosophical question, but within the context of my personal, everyday life experience. Although it cannot be objectively certain that I 'have' free will (nor can it be objectively proven that we are determined), it certainly feels to me, existentially, as if I do freely make choices in my life. So, I choose to believe that I have free will, however limited it might be, because, first, that is how the phenomenology of willing feels to me existentially, and, secondly, because believing in free will has more positive outcomes than the contrary belief, since subscription to determinism risks kindling a defeatist attitude to an aspirant on the road.

However, I also subscribe to the belief that my beliefs, values, positions, ideas, attitudes, actions, responsiveness, etc., the whole course of my life, is also determined or influenced to some extent

by “forces” of which I am largely unaware and over which I have little or no immediate control, although I strive daily to become more aware of these embedded situational influences and thus extend my felt-willful-control over my life. Seems like a lifelong task.

I feel that in the years of my life when I was not in a clearly committed relationship with God, I made a lot of “bad” choices, “bad” meaning choices that did not take God’s will into any account and resulted in dysfunctional and unhappy life consequences, felt failures, etc., like the ‘bad’ choices made by the “prodigal son” in the biblical account. That story has been a familiar feature of my life since childhood.

After “coming back to God after God” in my life—a very clear and definitive event that occurred in the context of a battle with cancer, involving love, forgiveness, relations with people, behavioral changes, etc. and which is ongoing—I have come to consciously *desire* that my will, my life choices, be altogether aligned with what I *believe* God ‘wants’ for me, even if I cannot determine this objectively, clearly and distinctly, once and for all.

The clearest experience of the alignment of my will with God’s will emerges for me in prayer with what simply feels to me like a natural desire and deep longing for my relationship with God to be primary to everything else in my life, a longing to be one with God. All the rest of my life, everything I do or want or hope for, all the goods of this world, feel to me automatically like they must be secondary to the primacy of my relationship with God, as I

experience this relationship in my most prayerful moments. This prayerful surrender is what I think of as aligning my will with God's will, a movement toward that. Any decision or action that might disrupt this primacy of my relationship with God in my life is simply not acceptable. I think that if I can be one with God, as with my Beloved, then my willing should be aligned with God's will. The wills of lovers align naturally without effort.

In a committed love relationship, two wills become one will while, paradoxically, remaining two. That is not to say that this is always easy to accomplish and maintain, which is another matter in which grace (gift) and diligent effort come into play. Achieving the solidarity of will-alignment is easier to say than to accomplish and is always a work in progress, with God or with your lover....

When disruptive or irritating events occur in my life, recalling the primacy of my relationship with God removes the felt disruption and dysfunction for me, gives it perspective, like rebooting the system. What can any worldly concern matter to me in the face of being on the same page with God? If I have that relation right, everything else is right; if not, nothing is. So, when I am considering doing anything, that consideration must align with the primacy of my relationship with God in my life as I experience it through a process of prayerful discernment. When this is in balance, my whole life feels to be in graceful equilibrium. Then I truly feel that I am in the space of "not my will but God's will be done."

## 38.

# The Kingdom of Heaven

Jesus suggests that not everyone will get into the Kingdom of Heaven. Everyone is called, of course, but not everyone responds to the call effectively. Leaving 'the world' behind in detachment is challenging.

The call emanating from the teachings of Jesus involves a movement away from the everyday conventional world and its values, so far away that a committed Christian might at once be considered a total loser in the eyes of the world and yet be fully welcomed in the Kingdom of God, a member in good standing, just the kind of marginalized, defeated person the Kingdom of Heaven is looking for.

Losers are welcome in the Kingdom of Heaven, especially repentant losers seeking forgiveness and a new heart through atonement and non-attachment. Their faith will carry them. It is the rich and the powerful, the worldly, the power brokers, who will have the hard time. It will be hard for them to haul all their possessions, material and non-material, through the narrow gate leading to the Kingdom. They *desire* to be immortal diamond, of course, but they are hard-pressed to leave any of their precious things behind, like the monkey who wouldn't let go of his fistful of

rice and so could not get it back out of the narrow hole in the coconut, thus remaining self-trapped.

No mere mortal can enter the Kingdom of Heaven under their own power. God's Kingdom is a place or non-place populated by immortals, by pure spiritual beings who, apparently, have just enough non-spiritual materiality to be recognized as who they are, but not enough to slow them down in the impossible to conceive spaceless, timeless realm of the kingdom of heaven. That is how it will be with an immortal body. Everything will last Forever, of course. But, in truth, "Forever" will cease to be a meaningful idea in the Kingdom, as will all temporal/spatial/categorical referents—a fundamental 'orientation' that is impossible to imagine, comprehend, or understand but which can, perhaps, be felt by virtue of the longing of the aspirant in the theopoetic attitude.

Perhaps we are already such an immortal body without realizing it. If so, or when we do make it to heaven, our mortal body will be of no further use, that is for sure. It will be left behind, so to speak, to return to non-being, to the carapace of an old cocoon bent on eternal return. For what could be more important than creating an immortal body and becoming immortal? What could be more important than getting into the Kingdom of Heaven? Nothing is more important. The Kingdom of Heaven is the whole deal. It's what life as we know it is all about, this brief preparatory phase in the world. Miss that, you miss everything.

Jesus came into the world with a message for the world: the end of our mortal life in the world is the beginning of a whole new

immortal life in heaven for those who want it, for those who believe it to be so, for those who have faith in the teachings and Way of Jesus. This new world is an invisible world of spirit. As such, it is nowhere and nowhen. It is beyond time and space. It is prior to freedom and consciousness and incapable of being thought. I assign to this unthinkable, non-sensible, impossibility that never was or will be and cannot be anywhere...the term "heaven."

Heaven is a place or no-place where Jesus thinks we should just naturally want to be because it is, well, heavenly, and couldn't be any better. We would have been in this place already and would not have needed Jesus to come into the world to proclaim the Good News had we not allowed our desire to see what is happening and to control what happens to supersede the call to non-attachment to the world motivated by love. That hubris is what separates us from the very thing we so much want to become, immortal diamond.

We started taking the appearances of things for real things. We got lost amid the shadows and mirrors. We needed someone to point the way out of the maze, someone to remind us that the reality we perceive through our senses and call "my world" is not real in an objective, reductive materialist sense, the way conventional, physicalist consciousness pretends it to be. We needed someone to remind us that the Kingdom of Heaven is not of this world. And not everyone in the world will be fit to enter the Kingdom. You cannot serve two masters and serve both well.

Some might yet want to argue that the material, three-dimensional world that conforms to our sense perceptions, thanks

to the forces of evolution, is somehow the world in-itself rather than merely a representation concocted out of our own consciousness, reflecting our existential situation, which is to be here and now while not knowing whether our perceptual reality is the objectively true reality. It is simply the reality that is given to each, as it is given, where we live every day. We live "in the world." But, if we cling to and are attached to that world, as if we couldn't live without it, thinking (like Plato's cave dwellers) that the shadowy appearance of the world is the ultimate reality, blindly worshipping it as if it were the proverbial golden calf, then we will fail to be open to the infinite possibility of the impossible that is heaven, and to an immortality, a Forever and ever, that transcends the whole idea of possibility and impossibility.

## 39.

# Heaven and World

The way of heaven is opposed to the way of the world. Yet Jesus teaches that the way of heaven is at hand, here, in the world, even though the way of heaven is supposedly opposed to the way of the world and couldn't possibly be in the world since it cannot be anywhere. Heaven is not opposed to earth, which is another conceptual matter to investigate. But "heaven" is opposed to "the world." What is meant by "the world"?

The world is visible and perceivable, a set of power relations. Heaven is invisible. Its power is its powerlessness in the world. Yet, the world is not "really-real" in a physicalist sense. Heaven is real, in the fullest sense of that term. It will last Forever. That is about as real as you can get. The visible is not real, not permanent. Only the invisible could be real, beyond, space, time, and language.

Heaven is nowhere. But the world is always here or there, somewhere. Heaven is Forever, eternal, unchanging, 'a' perpetual now, an objective impossibility. But the world is passing, going out of being, never really "here" or "now" as it purports to be. It is fool's

gold. Whereas heaven is one with God, the world is being apart from God. But apart from God 'there is' nothing.

How is it that humans came to fall prey to the overarching illusion of the world, the illusion that the perceptual world as it appears to or is consciousness is the “really-real,” objective world of science? How did they fall victim to it, and thus find themselves in need of being “saved” from that illusion, a salvation that is at the heart of the teachings of Jesus? We needed a savior who will deliver us from the illusion that the world we perceive through our senses is the real, objectively true world, the illusion of all illusions...a savior who will show us that heaven is the real world which can be perceived only by your heart and soul in the light of faith and the longing of love.

Heaven endures Forever. Yet the world is what is tangible and feels real to our senses here and now. It is what we know. It is the sun rising in the morning. Heaven is not something we can grasp through our senses. Any sense image of the Kingdom of Heaven is already wrong since any way you “take” it would be to mis-take it since it cannot be adequately ‘taken’ or represented by merely human concepts, being entirely unconditional. In its unconditionality, heaven is everywhere at hand and yet it is nowhere at all, for those who do not have eyes to see. Heaven is less a place than it is a being-with God.

I find myself existing in an everyday perceptual configuration I refer to as “my world.” This configuration itself would be various ways in which I am aware of the space in which I live and love and

work and have my being. I call that “my world.” It is here or there, entailing this or that other person engaged in this or that specific activity, represented by this or that set of descriptors...children, parents, colleagues, friends, etc. My world is the world I am conscious of in all the subtlety of my overlapping and intertwining consciousnesses of it, represented in a time/space framework, here and now, as “what is.” The Kingdom of Heaven is not like that at all.

Just being invisible sets the kingdom of heaven apart from the world. We tend to equate the visible and the real, to believe the visible is the real, just because I *see* what feels *real*, which is circular and begs the question. Why am I in a world where the sun appears to rise and set? All my perceptual world is like that: illusory. My perceptual world cannot be the real world. That is a made-up or constructed world fabricated from (and as) consciousness that I present to myself in order to have some representation of what is nevertheless beyond representation in the unrepresentable unconditionality of consciousness. How did I end up in such a false perceptual situation? What am I doing here?

To be sure, the heavily constructed world of my everyday consciousness has a certain kind of reality, so it is ‘real’ *in some sense*, as what it is, whatever that might be. It is certainly ‘my reality’. But it is not what it appears to be. It is a simulacrum, a construction I believe in. Jesus is here to remind us that we should not fall prey to that illusion of the reality of the world. The way of the world ends in a dead end. The way of heaven, however, enters upon a non-future of infinite beginnings-again, endlessly fresh and

new since heaven will have had no beginning and will have no end, but 'be' Forever and ever.

The teaching of Jesus is focused squarely on being able to distinguish the difference between the way of the world and the way of heaven. He tries repeatedly to relate to ordinary people what the kingdom of heaven is "like" ... a mustard seed, a child, yeast, the owner of a vineyard ... but they just don't seem to get it. One thing about any teaching of Jesus is that it is always more or less opposed to the ordinary, everyday, conventional way of "the world," starting with the naive belief that my ordinary perception gives me the objective world as it is, in itself, especially understood as a three-dimensional, material world existing separately from my consciousness of it. The world and the illusion of it as the "really-real" is exactly what you will have to let go of to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

We get attached to the world, to this or that sensory dimension or configuration of the world, whether it is food, family, money, TV, house, boat, or whatever...we get attached and it is hard to let go of the attachment because we feel that we need it. We feel we need an attachment to the world or we will lose something significant about ourselves. Why are we beings who get attached to illusions, like sheep without a shepherd? Are we a mistake? No. We are works in progress. And perhaps part of that progress is coming to see that our perceived world is not the real, objective world it appears to be. It is merely the consciousness of phenomena

that appear 'in' that world opened and made possible by my consciousness of it.

Ultimately, we are all going to be separated from the illusory world we currently inhabit. We will all be awakened, finally detached from the 'material' world. But we can begin the process of separation from the illusion of the realness of materiality right now, even though we are still existing in the unreal, illusory world of material sense perceptions, as if it were real. This separating of ourselves now, in non-attachment from the lure of the worldliness of the world, is the way of prayerful contemplation, the way of the Cross and personal transfiguration...what can be easily thought of as the threshold or antechamber to the Kingdom of Heaven itself.

## 40. Only God is Real

Foxes have their lairs, birds have their nests, Jesus instructs us, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. So, let the dead past bury the dead! Come, follow me! And I mean, like, right now! Don't worry about packing a suitcase, skip the goodbyes, and let's get on the road!

Your only job as a Christian, the only job that makes sense ultimately in this world, is to spread the Good News about the Kingdom of God. So, get to it! Give yourself wholly over to the task and don't look back. Once the hand is laid on the plow, Jesus suggests, no one who looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is more important than anything. Getting 'into' 'it' is everything.

Within the impossible framework of accessing the inaccessible which is everywhere and nowhere, we can ask: how do we gain entrance to the Kingdom of God? To be sure, you must be fully committed. There can be no hesitation, no holding back, no

looking for a special deal. There are no grey areas. Even the basic requirements of being human are insignificant in comparison to the importance of the task of gaining entrance to the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom is more important than burying the dead. That makes it clear. To ignore the ritual duty of burying the dead is to separate ourselves from the commonweal, from communal life and human sociality. Here Jesus is unambiguously putting even the most fundamental of social practices, one that is integral to our humanity, in second place when it comes to seeking the Kingdom of God. Rules that constitute and govern the human community are as nothing compared to the ultimate and everlasting rule of the Kingdom of God. Let the dead bury their dead. To follow Jesus is to come to new life, to eternal life, Forever and ever.

The Christian call for a radical separation from the ways of the world is also reflected in Jesus placing even the human practice of saying goodbye to family and loved ones in a position that is lower in importance and significance than the overarching value of the Kingdom of God. There is no value that structures any aspect of the human situation that is greater in value than the value of the Kingdom of God. That is the message of Jesus.

What does it profit someone to have unprecedented success in the human world but fail to create an immortal body for themselves, as Aristotle suggests we should do, a spiritual or perfected body by which to enter the spiritual Kingdom of Heaven? Nothing. It profits them not at all. The time to work toward

achieving the immortal body necessary for accessing the Kingdom of God, is right now, not tomorrow, not as soon as I finish up my chores, go to the bank, bury my brother ... no, the time is right now!

Put it at the top of your list. All the other things on your list of what you hope to get accomplished today are as nothing compared with starting right now to focus on the path to eternal life, which is the path to the Kingdom of God. You must wake up! You must forget about everything and everyone else. This is now your full-time occupation: living and proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven. There will be nowhere to lay your head and get a good night's rest on this journey because even the human need for sleep is of a lower value than the value of being with God in the Kingdom of Heaven. So—how do you get there?

The call of Jesus is a call for detachment from the grip of the material world, from all the apparent 'goods' of the world, a call for us to let go of what we think is so important from a human point of view, what we feel we need in order to be 'somebody' or to "make it" or whatever. We are called to let go of our life itself insofar as we live it for ourselves and our own egoistic self-aggrandizement and self-fulfillment. That is the teaching of the Cross of Jesus. Detachment from the world is a movement from egoism to altruism, from self-love, to love of others, and finally to love of God.

To let go of our clutching hold on life, in general, that is the call ... to let go especially of the sneaky idea that the sense-world, the lived-world of sensory perception, is the real and the everlasting world when, in fact, it is a world that is coming to an

inevitable end even as we speak. The Kingdom of Heaven is the only real world. It is the only world that lasts Forever. The world of appearances is illusory.

Perhaps attachment is simply our love of life grasping at 'something' with grubby, greedy hands, trying to 'have' 'it', to possess 'it', to dominate and control 'it' ... in short, to have our cake and eat it too: everything all the time, not knowing when enough is enough. This is what we must let go of. Attachment is an obstacle to the Kingdom. Letting go is letting be and that is the way of detachment.

The teachings of Jesus ... the way of Love, radical detachment, living for others, forgiveness as the way to the Kingdom of Heaven ...all point to the soaring and ultimate importance of accessing the Kingdom by getting unstuck from the world and our false beliefs about the world, the delusions we subscribe to without knowing or realizing that we are doing it.

Rather, the way of Jesus, the Christian way, is a way of detachment, forgiveness as detachment, humbly practicing the phenomenological epochē (bracketing) to overcome naive realism, simplifying all, seeing the material world as an illusory product of consciousness, maya, becoming (i.e., having no 'is'-ness), reflecting on our consciousness playfully, relating to God within the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of Light.

We move past the veil of the unreal by becoming childlike and innocent ... like children who see that only God is real.

Childlike-ness is prerequisite for entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven.

# 41.

## The Folly of God

*"For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."*

1 Corinthians 1:25

Sometimes people speak about things with a knowledgeable air while knowing little about the true nature of those things as they are in themselves. Take the concept of "God," for instance. We cannot know God by trying to fit God into an anthropocentric conceptual schema of our own making. We cannot grasp God in a concept at all. In fact, any conceptual representation we have of God is surely wrong, distorted, misguided, impossible, misleading, merely constructed, etc., yet we nevertheless keep talking and talking and talking about God, like smitten lovers ignoring all the returned love letters.

To avoid such entanglements, Jack Caputo signs on Paul Tillich (who subscribes to the idea that we need an ongoing reformation of the unconditional) and Jacques Derrida (who 'discovered' *differance*, the key to deconstruction) to hack a phenomenological path from 1 Corinthians 1: 25 into some radical

theological backcountry in *The Folly of God* (Polebridge, 2016). In the pages of this critique of Christendom, as one might characterize it, deconstruction joins a radical theology of the unconditional in a new telling of an old tale.

Deconstruction is neither an 'it' nor something that we do, properly speaking. It is not like a practice *per se*. Nor is it like tearing down an old house to see what it's made of or what parts might be salvageable or how it might be put back together more meaningfully. Easier to say what deconstruction is not than what it is, like the apophantic approach to theology. Rather than being something, deconstruction indicates a 'something' that is not quite a some-thing, and which inheres in all assertions: they carry within themselves the seeds of their own undoing, their own deconstruction, due to their being in a state of perpetual coming-to-an-end or to-fruit. Even when they try not to, the tracks of our sense-experience are erasing themselves beneath our feet, leaving only the slightest trace.

Everything that has been constructed by consciousness is destined to be de-constructed (its fallibility revealed) by that same skeptical consciousness that conditioned it. 'It' (this or that consciousness) is always being deconstructed by the consciousness of it, hopefully not a vicious but a hermeneutical circle. Deconstruction would thus be the very heart of consciously becoming, a becoming which never achieves the full identity of being, relentlessly held back by its own impossibility.... Deconstruction reveals the unfulfilled striving-to-be of things; the

movement perpetually toward; the journeying that never arrives; the almost-but-not-quite; the possibility of the impossible; the speaking of the unspeakable; the just-about. Phenomenology is the science of tracking the almost-there-ness of the coming-to-be of things.

For Caputo, seeking the event-structure behind the utterance of God, the God before God, thus, God *without* God ... this involves a kind of 'a-theism' (which does not become atheism). 'A-theism' is an idea which properly speaking cannot be thought without sounding a little mad declaring a 'without God' that is paradoxically 'in' God.

The Death and the Resurrection of God go together such that you cannot have one without the other. To find God you must let go of God. In the dying and the coming back to life, there is (for those with eyes to see) a revelation of the pure event structure of God (which is prior to God), as both '*God*' before God and '*God*' after God, what Richard Kearney seeks to highlight perhaps with the word "anatheism." In both cases, the old God as Supreme Being, the "omni" God, the First Mover God are replaced with an idea of God who is himself unfinished, a God or 'Goddling-process' who is still becoming God in and through the world, becoming more perfect (if that is possible) through every act of consciousness, in this very act of creation in which we share the creative act with God in our every constitutive act of consciousness, every here and now of our experience. God is God-with-us. We are, paradoxically, an active part of God's creation, actively co-constituting our consciousness of

the world with God, a co-constitutive, truly creative activity operating within the realm of the conditional (our simple, everyday being) but whose origin is in the unconditionality of the undeconstructible, the "I know not what" in whom and by whom we live and have our being at every moment.

Caputo finds the unconditionality of the unconditional in both the work of Tillich and Derrida. They both teach that a kind of a-theism precedes and follows from any real understanding of God; an a-mystic cry to be free from the idea of "God" altogether. Tillich thinks that the conceptual framework of metaphor underlying logical, reasonable predication, shows that we cannot say anything meaningful about God. In the face of this, we must have the courage to be. Derrida thinks that deconstructibility is a necessary feature of predication, so there is only a possibility of speaking the unspeakable indefinitely, never once and for all. All of perceived reality, personal, interpersonal, social, political, global ... these are all co-constituted confabulations playing themselves out in time/space and for which we are just as responsible as Almighty God, the Absolutely Unconditional. We're all in this together. We are all 'in' God and it is God who is 'in' all, animating everything, a playful, co-creative God who is thus, above all, 'with-us'.

A third element in Caputo's work directs the currents of playfulness in which the drama of unconditionality and the Kingdom of Heaven unravel themselves. This brings us to what could be called the mystical element in Caputo's philosophical theology of the unconditional. The move by which language—the

word if not the Word—would track the trace of the impossible within the possible is through the productive ambivalence of the mytho-poetic grapheme, a language game Caputo deploys in the guise of a “theopoetics.” Here is the key, the sacred dimension, the way around the impasse of an abstract unconditionality and an impersonal *differance* such that what is revealed is now allowed to give itself freely for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. God will not be shown through the rational word to the high and mighty. No, in the final analysis, God can only be indirectly hinted at and glimpsed obliquely by children peeking childlike through the folly of a theopoetics of the impossible speaking the unspeakable. It is squarely in the act of faith blossoming as the playfulness (weakness, openness, vulnerability, etc.) of his poetic language that Caputo offers us a glimpse of the weakness of God, an all-too-quick look at the ‘foolishness of God’ seen through the eyes of the blinking world.

All the while, never forgetting that the God we talk about is not God. Which is why Caputo's language must be Forever self-erasing or self-deconstructing its every inscription and every position-taking, accommodating the hermeneutical possibility of the impossible unto the limits of the sacred and the divine, and, for those who have eyes to see, bringing into visible relief what is otherwise condemned to invisibility.

## 42. The Sword of Jesus

*"Do not assume that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword...."*

Matthew 10:34

It seems strange to hear the same Jesus who teaches the way of love, compassion, and forgiveness say that he did not come to bring peace to the world but, rather, came to bring a sword. And this sword may set father against son, mother against daughter, etc.

Jesus certainly was not known for his swordplay. When a mob led by Judas Iscariot came to arrest him, and Peter draws his sword and cuts off the ear of the servant of the High Priest, Jesus immediately rebukes him and tells him to put his sword away (John 18:10). Again, when James and John ask Jesus to rain down fire on the Samaritan town that did not welcome him, "Jesus turned and rebuked them" (Luke 9:55). Jesus would have to explain repeatedly to his disciples that his "Kingdom" was not of this world. The sword as a symbol of the conquering, worldly warrior is not exactly what Jesus has in mind when he says he is coming with a sword.

In a broader, metaphorical sense, “the sword” can be understood as what decisively puts one thing to an end and allows something new to come into prominence. From this perspective, the sword of Jesus can be thought of as what lays to rest the way of the world in favor of the way of love. The way of love itself is a kind of ‘sword’ that will create enmity between those who hold to the values of the world and those who accept the value orientation of the cross, the way of love, forgiveness, self-abnegation. The sword symbolizes cutting yourself off from the way of egoism, self-interest, and self-aggrandizement, just as “the cross” is the symbol of self-sacrifice for the good of others.

From the perspective of this interpretation, heavenly love and “the sword” go together. But the sword must come first. Certainly, the Kingdom of Heaven is a disposition of love, peace, and joy, but it is also a disruption of the kingdom of the world. There is a natural enmity between heaven and the worldliness of the world. These cannot go together, as is reflected often in the Pauline formulation that there is an enmity between the flesh and the spirit (Galatians 5:17).

You cannot fully enter into the Kingdom of Heaven until you have cut your ties with the ways of the world. The Gospel of the cross, which is a radical self-renunciation for the sake of others, will challenge and disturb a lot of people in practice since it is contrary to the conventional ways of the world. Like Socrates refusing to abide by the rules of the old gods, Gandhi refusing to accept colonialism, Martin Luther King refusing to accept systemic racism,

the sword of Jesus is a liberating sword for cutting ties with the worldliness of the world. And that will inevitably create a disturbance of the peace.

Thus, the use of the term “sword” by Jesus in this passage underlines the radicalism of his teaching. It signifies the need to “take up your cross” and to surrender your self-will entirely to the will of God. That requires that God come first, that my relationship with God be absolutely and unequivocally primary in my life. Jesus highlights that point when he adds that anyone who loves father or mother, son or daughter, “more than me, is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37). There can be no hesitation, no halfway measures or looking back for “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:61).

## 43. Becoming Childlike

*“And so, the one who makes himself as little as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1-5,10)*

At first glance, it seems entirely fitting that Jesus should show his disciples a child as an example of who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Children are, above all, innocent. They can do no wrong. Certainly, the most deserving of the Kingdom of Heaven would be someone who has not done any harm, who could not do any harm since they are beyond good and evil. A child would be the perfect example of what was needed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven because of the innocent childishness of the child. What is this childishness or childlike-ness that we should become like in order to get into the Kingdom?

The innocence of children is a purity of not knowing, an excellence achieved as a kind of ignorance, the one thing Socrates claimed to ‘know’ about himself: the extent of his ignorance, like the proverbial ‘babe in the woods’, an ignorance that is the ground

of innocence. This ignorance is a purity that is not easily regained once it has been lost. Innocence is tough to regain.

Whereas the innocence of children makes them more susceptible to errors, it also leaves children more ready and willing to believe in the reality of a transcendent, invisible God and, thus, to give themselves over in faith. And faith is surely an important part of what is needed to get into the Kingdom of God. Oh, if we could only believe as purely and as easily as children believe! Alas, such faith, such radical letting go, is frightening and dangerous.

The idea that God created and is creating each and every one of us right now, and that this same God wants each and every one of us to be happy and joyful because God is somehow 'in' us and we are 'in' God ... this is the belief that the pure and untrammelled hearts of children embrace readily as they roll around on the ground just for the fun of it, playing.

Consider children at play. Children play with a greater abandon than do adults. Remember what it was like to be a child? Some adults seem to have forgotten how to play altogether, how to let go of their intentional hold on what they mistakenly judge to be what is objectively real and play with the coming-to-be of things, the coming of the Kingdom. To play is to let go into a kind of abandonment the outcome of which is objectively uncertain, like faith. Play is always an act of faith. This faith is like taking a risk on the unconditional bouncing of a ball, the 'play' of the ball which makes the game and without which there would be no game. Children do this better than adults, let go into the play of the game

of life. Adults have been encouraged by society to get to work, to become responsible, working people, not to be playing all the time. Children play, adults work. There you have it. Yet, here is Jesus the Christ, the teacher of the Good News, saying that adults should become like children if they want to get into the Kingdom of Heaven, if they want to pass through the narrow gate. One thing always seems to be true with Jesus: whatever lines up with the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus is going to be contrary to the conventional ways of the world. The world says: grow up! Jesus says: become childlike.

There is a risk involved in becoming childlike, especially for adults. There is always the risk that you might do something foolish where you end up looking silly or childish. Silliness and childishness are roughly equivalent where adults are concerned. Becoming childlike could undermine achieving success in the eyes of the world. Becoming childlike is undermined by a fear of becoming childish, a fear of letting our real Self hang out and be seen, a fear of being real and trusting and open and forgiving and compassionate ... like children are all the time, naturally, before they are taught by adults to act differently.

What difference would it make, for example, to enter into the reading of a text from the perspective of a child, an adult/child off on an adventure, seeing what there is to be found within the pages? Studying something for its own sake rather than for some other end is itself a kind of playfulness, a playing with the text, allowing a free

play of the text, playing with our reading or readings of the text, bringing our readings to the community sandbox to share the fun.... The “giving over” required by the playfulness of play is also a letting-go and letting-be that are markers for success in the Kingdom of Heaven. The whole trick is letting go of our attachment to the world of appearances and illusion, a letting-go that Christian children of God understand as the way of the cross, living your life beyond yourself, for others. Becoming an innocent, obedient, and loving child while letting go of all pre-possessive, self-asserting, self-conceptualizing, grasping, knowing, orderings imposed by an autonomous ego clinging to a false reality, a false story. Yes, but that is easier said than done. It requires a lifetime commitment.

Bottom line: You must become childlike and not merely childish if you want to get into the Kingdom of Heaven.

## 44.

# The Kingdom of God is at Hand

*“Jesus said to his apostles: “As you go, make this proclamation: ‘The Kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” Matthew 10: 7*

Jesus instructed his disciples to proclaim that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. What does that mean? The phrase “at hand” does not signify a temporal imminence. It does not denote the end of the world, for example, in an historical, factual, or ‘end times’ sense. Rather, the Kingdom of heaven is a purely spiritual realm and not another spatiotemporal event happening within the everyday worldliness of the world.

The Kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of the world occupy radically different ontological planes. The Kingdom of heaven is a perpetual disruption of the worldliness of the world and its ordinary everydayness posing as objective reality. Although the Kingdom of heaven is by its nature a radical challenge to the kingdom of the world (which will bring much enmity down upon his disciples, as Jesus realized: “You will be hated by all because of my name...” Matthew 10: 16-23), it does not challenge, encroach upon, or invade the kingdom of the world the way an invading army

might lay siege to a stronghold. Rather, the Kingdom of heaven lovingly rejects the very ground and foundation of the world in its posture of purporting to be the real world and true kingdom.

The Kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of love and peace accessed through the surrender of self and physical death. It is a kingdom of living in solidarity with God, of being in God while still appearing to be in the world, yet not *of* the world. Although we are always offered access to the Kingdom of heaven at every moment, it can be most difficult to enter, as is reported in the story of the rich, young man in Mark 10-17: “How hard it will be,” Jesus says, “for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God.” It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (an impossibility) than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of heaven.

The door to the Kingdom of heaven is a “narrow door,” indeed, because passage through this door requires a thoroughgoing self-renunciation and detachment from the worldliness of the world which only a few are willing to undergo. Most people prefer the wide and well-lit highway of self-aggrandizement, self-determination, and self-actualization ... the egoist, “me first” door to the kingdom of the world. That is what, according to Tara Burton in *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, Millennials and Gen-Xers are currently thronging to under the aegis of the “‘religion’ of the Self.” That door does not lead to the Kingdom of heaven.

Self-renunciation means letting go of desiring and seeking the riches of the kingdom of the world, including material, intellectual, relational, and social riches, the riches of power, prestige, position, family, friends, recognition, and reward in general. The kingdom of the world, on the other hand, is focused squarely on the self, on self-seeking and self-acquisition. It is marked by the accumulation of wealth, pleasure, possessions, fame, celebrity, confident self-assurance, worldly power, and pride ... all of which are magnets for success in the kingdom of the world.

It is hard for people who cling to the kingdom of the world to pass through the narrow gate into the Kingdom of heaven because it is hard to let go of our attachment to riches of one kind or another. Again, as Jesus points out, where your riches are there also is your heart (Matthew 6:21). At any time, however, even right now, in the midst of being-in-the-world, the kingdom of heaven is available to anyone who wants it. It is always "at hand," immediately available, offering a permanent invitation. A change of heart is the entrance fee. A change of attitude. You enter the Kingdom of heaven by embracing poverty, humility, self-surrender, service to others, and self-renunciation.

Here is a little example from my life. I got quite irritated when I got home one night because Ron, the apartment manager, had turned on the sprinkler and removed the handle to the faucet so I couldn't turn it off. I believed he did this to irritate me. When the sprinkler runs, the ballast tanks in the house keep refilling which produces noise in my apartment that is bothersome hour after

hour. Little fantasies of an angry confrontation started popping into my head in which I beat him up or did nasty things to him. Fortunately, God gave me the grace not to follow the route of confrontation.

Feeling helplessly irritated, I sat down to read my evening meditation as the ballast tanks moaned and groaned. The first words from an inspiring text by Pope Francis were that the Lord sends some of his disciples into “spiritual warfare.” Trying to deal with Ron’s hostility felt to me like spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare means battling the desire to react to irritating people in a worldly way with revengeful power. By reframing Ron’s harassment as a spiritual challenge and finding my way to love him and pray for him in the face of it, I took a little step through the narrow door into the Kingdom of heaven. Then, I went ahead and just used a wrench to turn off the sprinkler and went to bed. The next day, *mirabile dictu*, I was able to talk calmly with Ron and resolve the sprinkler problem which did not happen as I imagined it had.

A small, everyday event from my personal life. That is how the Kingdom of heaven is always “at hand” every minute of every day. It is always available whenever you are ready to renounce your worldly way of dealing with challenging situations and respond instead in a humble, loving, selfless, and spiritually developmental way. Then, as if by magic, you will find yourself already through the narrow door and suffused with the joyful air of the Kingdom of heaven.



## 45.

# Love, Joy, Oneness with the Other

*“If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love.” John 15: 9-17*

The essence of the salvific message of Jesus is contained in the prescription that we should love one another as he loves us and as he loves and is loved by his heavenly Father. An integral part of the Christian message of loving, then, is to know and accept that you are loved—and loved perfectly!—by a God who is love. You are and have always been loved by God as perfectly as it is possible to be loved, unconditionally and Forever, without fail.

The transformative process of loving and being loved that Jesus teaches is a bottomless wellspring of joy because it frees you from worldly cares. Jesus proclaimed his message and practice of love, he explained, so that the joyfulness engendered by this practice would be “in” us and our joy would thereby be complete, as his joy is complete. Joyfulness is the best sign of the way of love that Jesus brought into the world.

A Christian who is not experiencing a refulgence of joy is not yet living the messianic teaching of love and, thus, is not yet fully living the Christian way of life. Of course, there is always room to grow in love since love, in its ultimate manifestation, is infinite and incomprehensible, like God. Otherwise, it could not be said that God himself *is* love. All Christians, then, are, by definition, works-of-love in progress.

The joyfulness that flows from Christian love is possible even in the face of the ultimate sacrifice of a martyr's death, as many Christian martyrs have given witness. It is also true of every 'little death' approximating a martyr's death, even in the smallest of ways—like not having money for rent and getting evicted, or dealing with illness, or losing your job, or being divorced by a cheating spouse, or being deceived by a friend, or any other misfortune that can befall us in this life. In the face of such misfortunes, Christians are called by love to be relentlessly joyful! Not by virtue of your own stoic power, but by the power of love in you, by turning over your cares to the God of Love to bear. The Christian practice of love, by its very nature, separates or insulates the practitioner from life's suffering, transforming it. It doesn't prevent suffering from happening, but the suffering is transformed by love into a source of joyful liberation, for all suffering comes bearing a gift for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Jesus takes on my suffering and gives me back joy.

If you are not joyful, look to your lack of loving or to your doubting that you are eminently lovable and are loved perfectly by

God. “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8,16). Therefore, when you love as Jesus taught us to love, and when you accept that you are loved perfectly and Forever by a loving God, you will be joyful—regardless of your life circumstances. For the person who loves “lives in God, and God in him.” To be in love is to be in God. And the sign of that oneness is joy.

That little word “in” in the phrase “in love” suggests another way to think about this teaching of love and joy. When we love someone, we are, in a metaphorical sense, “in” them. And when we are reciprocally loved by someone, they are “in” us. To say that God is “in” you, or you are “in” God, indicates a spiritual and invisible way of being-in-the-other. This spiritual in-ness is quite real and can be felt as a lived experience every day. Love, joy, and oneness with God lived in and through others are the marks or signs of being a Christian.

Love is being in the beloved to the point of obsession, an inhabitation or oneness with the beloved that you do not produce. It happens *to you*, and you cannot help it, cannot stop it. And, reciprocally, to be loved is to be possessed by the beloved, as if you have been captured and taken prisoner by her. Jesus often spoke of God being “in” us and us being “in” God. “I am in the Father and the Father is in me...” “If you know me, you know my Father too” (John 14:1-12). This mystical oneness with God is analogous to the human relation of the lover with the beloved. I feel that those whom I love are one with me, even if they are now deceased. I am unable

to get those whom I love "out" of me, as if haunted by them such that I can invoke their presence, conjure them at will and be with them.

To love another person or to love God is to have lost yourself to them. Your life is not your own anymore. You are possessed or captured by the beloved to whom you have surrendered in your heart. This obsessive self-surrender is reflected in the idea that the greatest love that you can have would be to sacrifice your own life for others whom you love. That is at once the epitome of love and, also, an intrinsic dimension of all loving, the glory of the martyrs.

Whenever you love another, you have, in a sense, already laid down your life for them, and they now 'possess' you and you will be lovingly 'obsessed' by them. You are now "in" them in a way that defies Newtonian physics, and they are "in" you. That is how love works. All love is automatically a mystical union with the beloved.

To sum up: Love is the practice of the way. Oneness with the beloved is the outcome of the practice. Joyfulness is the fruit. Why would anyone not want to live such a perfectly lovely life? It is our natural human heritage. We are made for it.

## 46.

# The God Called God is not God

Wanting to consecrate my life to the service and love of God, yet I cannot know or conceive of God representationally. All conceptions of God are necessarily misconceptions. Oneness with God may be approached only through the narrow door of the heart's longing for perfectly unconditional love.

I cannot conceive of God. When I say the word "God" I am not bringing God into the comprehension of my knowing. It is an empty term having only formal reality and zero sense content. In short, the God one calls God is most assuredly not God.

Despite that impossibility of comprehension confronting me at the outset, I continue reflecting on the implicit idea that God is eternal; that God did not have a beginning and will not have an end; that God is necessarily the beginning and the end of all consciousness, life, and value; that God and reality are one. But, right off, the idea that God is presumed to be eternal stops reflective cogitation dead in its tracks, just like the term "God" itself does, since we cannot comprehend God. Properly speaking, I cannot conceive of what never had a beginning and what thus always was and always will be, no matter how many times I say the word "God" or "eternal" or "infinite" or "Forever." I can only see God now in my

present condition "through a glass darkly," as the saying goes, that is, through the inner vision of the loving heart, affectively seeing.

You may have a mystical experience or a felt direct intuition of God that is something more than what we call positive knowledge, but you will never be able to adequately put that experience into words such that your words are adequate to a full representation of that experience. Actually, if you think about it, such an 'experience' is not an experience at all.

God is not any sort of being. God does not enter into being. God is before all being in a way we cannot grasp and represent. God is the source of all being, by definition. God is all being in the sense that God is in all being and all being is in God, and God must be the continuing support of all being, but God does not enter into the realm of being as a being, except for divine incarnations like Jesus or Buddha. Nor is God the Being of beings, since that tautological identity says nothing more than that God is God.

Even though we cannot know God representationally, it is reasonable to postulate that since any God-source must be eternal, God is outside of time and space. Eternity is not time and space going on indefinitely. It is the end of the meaningfulness of time and space. There can be no time or space in eternity. But I cannot reach in any representational way into what is beyond space and time since human consciousness is structured by the preconditions of time and space as necessary features for the possibility of representational experience.

When I try to think of God as without beginning, I cannot do it. It is as if my thinking runs into a wall, an *aporia*, an insurmountable obstacle. Instead of being able to think God's eternity, I am struck with awe and wonder right at that point. Bam! The mental fuses are blown! Thus it is that the mystery of God and the contemplation of God gives rise to praise as a kind of natural, even necessary outcome of the blockage of ratiocination and logical reasoning. Wonder and awe and not representational knowledge are the wellspring of praise and worship. Love, adoration, and worship all begin where positive knowledge ends.

I long to know God in the sense of knowing as communion, as affective oneness with the other, a kind of carnal knowing. I know the longing, but I do not know the God I long for because God always escapes my longing, drawing it on. And so my longing, while paradoxically fulfilled, is always approximate. I believe that God knows me in a way that I do not know since I cannot know the mind of God. If that even makes sense to say. I believe God loves me. God holds me in being. God gives me everything that is good. I do not know the ways of God. The longing for God, the burning desire to be with God is enough for now. I know the longing, but the longed for escapes me, as in the *Song of Songs*.

This morning I thought that today is another day closer to being with God. Death is necessarily the door to eternity. Here is a metaphorical story I like. This material realm, my present incarnation, is like a chrysalis in which I am being prepared for eternity. I had a beginning, but only part of me will have an end.

After the appearance of me is gone, when my body returns to the earth from which it came, what will remain of me will be like the visceral presence of an absent lover: immortal diamond.

## 47.

# Consciousness and God

*Dear God:*

*I awaken from a sound night's sleep with a strong and clear desire to be with You that is more 'awake' than I am. That is the only thing that seems real to me at this moment, my desire to be with You. A surge of yearning love in my heart wanting to connect with You, like a lost dog wanting desperately to get home. And yet You are right here with me already. You are in all things and all things are in You. You saturate the world of appearances. Let's not quibble. You are always already in me, and I am in you, as you taught.*

*Yet still I feel the desire to beg You for this, to plead with You to come to me and be with me and let me be fully melted into You. My soul cries out to You helplessly like a mourner at the grave: "Do not leave me here!" "Do not abandon me!" Yet, I already know that You would never do that. The truth is that I am afraid that I would abandon You, that I would leave You, that I would turn away from You in my foolishness. You would never do that to me. Perhaps I am praying to You to keep me from doing that to myself. Yes, that sounds more like it.*

*Good Lord, save me from myself!*

I am not a material realist or reductive physicalist. I do not subscribe to the belief that there is an independently existing three-dimensional material world apart from my consciousness or when I am not conscious of it. That idea seems hopelessly naïve to

me and unverifiable. Of course, I see that it is the way things appear to be at first glance, just as the sun appears to move across the sky, just as day and night seem to be discontinuous when, in fact, they are a continuous reality, just as the earth appears not to be moving and to be flat. How easily our senses are fooled! How easily we go along with the subterfuge of sensation! We have forgotten Kant's second Copernican Revolution: our senses do not conform to a pre-existing world; the world we experience appears the way it does because it conforms to our senses.

I can have no experience of the subjective experience of others, neither of other human beings nor of any other apparent being such as a dog, horse, or housefly. My subjective experience is absolutely my own world, constituting that world for me alone. I don't believe that anyone else can experience my world as I experience it...or at all, in any way. Neither can I ever experience the subjective world of others. I appear to be living in the same world as others, yet I know that is completely impossible to confirm and easy to disprove. Thus, I suspect that it is not the case. The belief that there is a really existing world apart from consciousness is just another sun that seems to be moving across the sky.

Certainly, there seems to be some commonality, some sort of community of worlds, some genuine sociality among us humans. I say to someone: "Look at that mountain over there." And they say, "Yes, it is a beautiful mountain." Yet, I have no way of confirming that the mountain they are referring to is in any way the same

mountain that I am referring to. They try to describe the shape. Surely that should be objective. But when they say “It is sort of triangular” it gives rise to ideas in my mind that I am not sure are in theirs. There are many kinds of triangles. I do not know exactly what their experience of “mountain” is. We can define the term, but then we are left with the same problem with the words we use to define the term, trying to find a commonality of sense and meaning. That is the undoing of a reductive materialist or neurobiological approach to the nature of the real.

I don't believe and don't see how it is any way demonstrable that we inhabit the same sense world or the same meaning world as anyone else. Subjectively, we all live in different worlds that we somehow feel and believe are somehow the same. And it is a good thing we do, from an evolutionary standpoint. Why is nobody shocked by this? Because they all prefer to walk around in a kind of delirium of false beliefs that sweep these obvious dimensions of subjective experience under the rug. “There, that's better,” they say, “now we can go to sleep.”

Time to wake up! I would like to teach a course called “Waking Up!” This would be a course for those who are ready to see reality for what it is, ready to look behind the skin of appearances and the veil of the given to see what it looks like on the other side of the illusions we harbor and the pretenses we construct in order not to face up to the subjective poetic truth of the human situation.

The place to start is the illusion of the givenness of a material world that exists apart from consciousness. That is where Edmund

Husserl began his phenomenological program, with the epochē, bracketing bias and unknowability. Starting from anywhere else is mis-starting. I cannot prove that there is *not* a material world apart from my consciousness, but I cannot prove that there is either. Waking up must begin with this moment of skeptical withholding and bracketing of judgments about the supposedly real...

The same with God. I cannot prove that God exists or does not exist. It seems wholly reasonable to assume that God as a prime mover must certainly exist, in some sense beyond our ability to comprehend. God as the origin of life. Yet, the term “God” here is nebulous and unclear; incomprehensible.

Consciousness as origin.

Consciousness as God.

Consciousness is like sex or love, wholly good in and of itself. Yet, it can neither be known in itself nor that it exists. It is only surmised after the fact and too late to see its own coming-to-be.

Consciousness itself is not the same as the *contents* of consciousness, although there cannot be any consciousness apart from the contents of consciousness. And there cannot be any consciousness without a subject of consciousness. There is no such thing as consciousness without a subject and an object together in an act of actively being conscious. No pure consciousness. That is a myth and false belief, an illusion, an unjustifiable surmise. Bracket it.

There is only *my* consciousness (for me) or *your* consciousness (for you). I cannot have any consciousness of your

consciousness, nor can you have any experience of my consciousness. Impossible. And I never have any consciousness that is not consciousness of something within an experience of consciousness that I am having. There is the conscious subject, the object of consciousness and the act of consciousness in which the subject and object of consciousness are revealed. What else? Nothing.

Consciousness thus constitutes my world. How can I have any knowledge of anything outside of consciousness? That would be like saying that I can be conscious of what I am not conscious of, an obvious contradiction in terms. All my thinking, feeling, wishing, hoping, fearing, etc. are all 'acts of consciousness'. All my subjective experiences of the world have the form of acts of consciousness and nothing else. My acts of consciousness are immediately apparent to me in my experience of them as my experience of my world. No inferences are required. Like typing these make-believe words on this make-believe page in front of me. Just doing it.

The realist or physicalist errs by adding to the experience of consciousness the belief that consciousness reveals something more real existing apart from consciousness. But that is an act of faith, not knowledge. Hence, realists who deny the claims of theists but who then claim to have knowledge of the existence of the external world as it is, are contradicting themselves.

If we could separate consciousness from the subjects and contents of consciousness, that would leave over a kind of God that is pure consciousness, whatever that might be, a God who would be

the origin of all that is since only what is conscious can appear as reality, pure givenness grasped in an act of pure consciousness. Yet that would be like trying to separate sexuality as something in and of itself apart from some act of sexuality. Impossible. Sexuality, like consciousness, exists only in this or that act of sexuality. Like love. True love is always good. Yet it is only revealed in the act of loving. Like God.

## 48.

# Longing

Here I am, over-arching sense of pleasantly not-knowing dusted with a sprightly joyfulness and tranquility amidst the dappled shadows of the world. How odd are the wanton appearances of things! Certainly, not to be taken too seriously. Nothing to grasp of their being, but the aversion to being grasped by the shadows grips me with a certain trepidation of wonder, this strange world that is so familiar. Where are You now, my Love? My Ground and Foundation! Where have You gone? Come to me, my Beloved....

Here is how I find myself this morning: clearheaded with mystery abounding despite being able to make things work, to make things happen. Little black squiggles appearing on the screen in front of me ripening with sense, signifying something I know not what in the final analysis. I want to say it is absurd, but that would already be saying too much, as if I am somehow on the outside and able to comprehend the whole, as if I were not saturated with longing for it.

Torching up adventitiously within my consciousness, longing appears/is given like a gift. Longing constructs me and my reality

out of nothing at every instant, my sense of meaning, such as it is. Longing, aching for the origin, for You, my Beloved, the origin and end of every possibility, the beginning and the end. My everything. My All in All. I look for you everywhere, desperate with longing. Do not hide from me, my Love! Will you never lift the veil between us?

Here is what "God" means to me existentially: the love desire of my longing that burns in my heart with no end in sight, a burning tree with a fire that burns but does not consume, an end that is a perpetual beginning, an inside with no outside. A pureness of longing aching with a love-fire that is not fulfilled or satisfied by any fictions within the world, any appearances or stories, and with no end in sight.

If I long for another it is only to find the infinite revealed there in finitude, dancing in their eyes, whispering to me in their smile, so that I might know You more perfectly. How unlikely! How uncanny! Yet your reflection dances everywhere I look, beckoning to me with hope. Who will look back at me with your eyes? In whom will you appear to me?

This is how I must conceive of you: my Significant Other, my One and Only, perfect in your beauty, perfect in every way beyond comprehension. I *must* adore You. I *must* worship You. I *must* try to please You in every way. That is my desire, my everything, but it is like breathing and I am not in control of it. I want you to smile upon me. I want you to let me offer my life to others, for you, because of you, for your perfect Love. Here and now in this world of dreams. Nothing else will do. Nothing else comes close. I want to give myself

entirely to You. I want you to be the fullness of meaning in my life, the whole of my world, my one and only. All the rest is vaporous illusion, flickering shadows, the jitterbugging of the unreal behind seductive eyes where the light is going out like the tide. A sea of dreams and false ideas, vibrating energy, appearances, nothing more...not even that much. Where are You to be found, my Love?

How lost I would be without You, my Beloved! How bereft and forsaken! Connected with You makes everything else possible, like a lifeline to the only real there is, or isn't.

How I love You! A voice cries out in the night. I embrace You and call your name when darkness falls like a veil upon the earth's turning, longing for you and looking everywhere for you. Have you seen Her? For You alone are my world, my Everything. Beloved, find me here! Come to me now, my Beautiful One!

Longing cries out in my heart without expression, without words, a silent cry, a pleading without fulfillment, yet somehow mysteriously and blissfully, it is fulfilled in every moment of its desperation. To want with infinite longing is a kind of lack that is better than any satisfaction. It is more like a fullness that does not cease overflowing. A burning bush that does not burn out. The perpetual renewal and re-commencing without beginning or end at the heart of immortality.

Chain me to your heart so I do not wonder off in confusion, following false ideas and dreams of more and mine. Let me never forsake You, for You have never forsaken me. You are the Savior of my life at every instant, my Redeemer, my Rescuer, my Eternal

Consort, my Everything that is Good and True and Beautiful. At every instant. Now and Forever.

O I am lovesick with longing for You!

# Awakening: A Prayer

In the morning there are songs  
Of praise and glory to You  
In my heart and on my lips,  
The taste of You in my mouth.  
My body filled with Your Love.

A cup overflowing.

Songs of joy stream from my heart.  
My soul rejoices in Your Holy Name  
For all that You have done for me  
Your lowly and unworthy servant.

You have loved me Forever.

You are always faithful.

Your Infinite and Unending Love...

How great is Your Love!

I shudder and melt

When you turn your face toward me.

My heart is crushed with Your Love.

I swoon from Your touch.

Unworthy are my words,

While You are infinitely Good and Kind.

Your compassion is a rushing stream.

Your Love is overflowing.

You are everything to me.

You are my All in All.

How am I so blessed

That You should take notice of me?

How fortunate am I among men!  
I sing You songs of thanks and praise.  
I sing songs to Your great glory.  
My heart is renewed, my heart  
Leaps up at the sound of Your footsteps.  
You knock at my door,  
You call my name,  
My soul bolts from its languishing.  
My spirit comes alive.  
You rescue me from the torrent.  
You pluck me from the blaze,  
You redeem me from my foolishness.  
You save me from myself.  
You take me under Your wing.  
The darkness has no power  
In the face of Your Love  
A world of light.  
You are everything to me  
You are my All in All.  
Come to me, my Perfect Love  
Make a dwelling place  
In my humble, longing heart.  
Come and be my only Love Forever.  
Be in me that I might be in You  
Forever and ever and ever.

Amen