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Dear friend,

It was hard not to feel the skepticism rise up when we decided on mysticism for this issue. Much of my education and cultural upbringing was to make small of what didn't sit in the realm of reason. If it couldn't be understood through the intellect or five senses, it was probably of little value to the world. For most of the family I grew up with, real achievement was in the acquirement of financial and intellectual capital: the more you knew and gained in a tangible, transactional sense, the better you could sleep at night. I know I'm not alone in this conditioning, and I know it's still the *modus operandi* for most cultures today.

And yet, there was also something about the way the word "mysticism" landed in me that felt liberating. The concern that this issue would be dismissed like a puff of smoke was ultimately overcome by a more exciting impulse: that it might help me and others break free from some of the restrictive ways of knowing ourselves—and all that we're a part of.

One of the realisations I had while working on the issue is that mysticism isn't exclusive to a niche subset of people living in the hills making potions and chanting. The ability to access the mystic, to *be* the mystic, is innate in all of us, and can find expression in the most mundane of activities. The work is to imagine things in one's orbit as alive and porous: the pot-plant on the coffee table, the stranger on the bus, the mountaintops in the distance—all of it already in dialogue, awaiting our participation. It is there, in that space of imagination and deep listening, that we learn who we need to be.

Wrapping a single definition around mysticism (demystifying it, if you will) is a tempting prospect, but it also feels somewhat futile. The kind of connection the early mystics talked about went far beyond the intellect; it was a union with the Divine (or god or universe or higher consciousness) that occurred through experience—one that was usually contemplative or ecstatic in nature. It's often likened to a process of surrender, where all sense of separation falls away. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner describes a mystic as someone "who has the gnawing suspicion that the apparent discord, brokenness, contradictions and discontinuities that assault us every day might conceal a hidden unity." I also like Joseph Lee's provocation in this issue that mysticism is "a longing to return."

Regardless of how open you are to this conversation, I hope you find something in these pages that sparks your curiosity. The absence of mysticism in our modern lives is palpable: it's in the carelessness that is shown to the land—the species loss, the climate denial; it's in our struggle to make healthy connections. I'm curious about what might shift if we did start to live with an eye for the holy: making meaning out of the magpie that keeps showing up in our lives, or stopping to take in the language of the seas. How might that drive us to more fiercely protect what we're part of? How might it help us to love more than we've known?

Enjoy the magic.

Yours,
Nathan

Behind extraordinary ideas, there are extraordinary people. *Dumbo Feather* is a magazine about these people. In each issue, we scour the globe for those with the drive to make a difference. We seek out those who inspire us, excite us and thrill us with possibility. Whether they've touched millions or just those nearby, what unites them is their passion.

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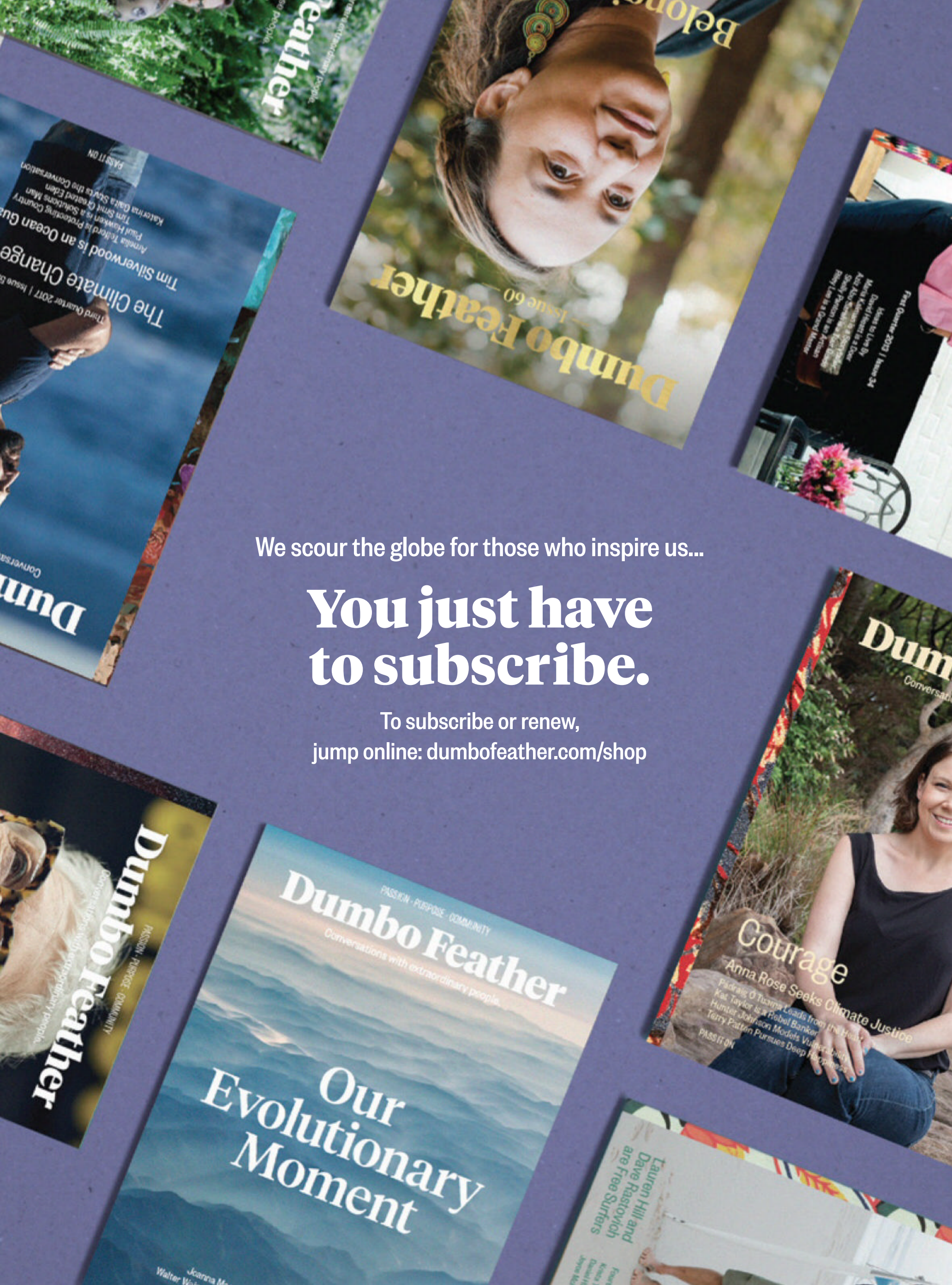


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A Language Beyond Reason

Pierz Newton-John

“The fundamental tragedy of the human condition is that we are sentient, sensitive, meaning-driven beings in a universe that is overwhelmingly mindless, insensate and random.”



I grew up in a scientific family. My grandmother Irene was the daughter of the physicist Max Born, who won the Nobel Prize for his work on quantum mechanics and was a close friend of Albert Einstein. She was herself scientifically well educated and had translated the correspondence between the two men—letters of great importance and interest to the history of science—into English. A proud atheist, she always rejected any talk of the spiritual as superstitious nonsense. And yet when I visited her on her deathbed, she admitted with some shame that her lack of faith was wavering. She was afraid to die, and the psychological pressure to grasp at some straw of hope for an afterlife was strong. She recognised this as the desperate ploy of a fearful mind, but nonetheless struggled to resist it. Not long after this, she fell into unconsciousness for the last time, and I never knew if or how she resolved her inner conflict.

On her last night, a vigil of family members including her daughter and my aunt, the singer Olivia Newton-John, had gathered at her home. Olivia, a more spiritually open person than Irene, was alone in the room with her when her mother died. In the silence after her last breath, Olivia spoke, asking her mother for a sign. “If you’re okay, let me know by making the candles flicker,” she said. At that moment the candles did indeed flicker, and in the same instant there was a loud bang in the next room. A glass candlestick holder had exploded.

Such stories are easy to ridicule, and I’m sure Irene would have done just that, had such a tale been recounted to her. From a scientific standpoint,

“anecdotal evidence” is an oxymoron. Yet such experiences are harder to dismiss at first hand. I’ve often thought about that particular event. How to account for the apparently spontaneous shattering of a candlestick holder under any circumstances, let alone at that precise moment?

The capacity of such strange episodes to challenge the skeptical mindset is attested to by an article in *Scientific American* titled “Anomalous Events That Can Shake One’s Skepticism to the Core.” It recounts how a previously inoperable transistor radio that had belonged to the grandfather of the author’s wife suddenly came to life and played a romantic song on the day of their wedding, just as his wife was expressing her sadness that her grandfather was not present to give her away. The fact that the author Michael Shermer is the publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, a publication devoted to the debunking of pseudoscientific and paranormal claims, shows the powerful subjective impression this experience made on him, challenging beliefs in which the author was deeply invested, emotionally and professionally.

Such experiences are actually not uncommon, and seem to cluster around significant moments, especially death. In a class I run on death and dying for The School Of Life, one participant—a barber—told me a story about how he was cutting the hair of a customer whose grandfather had recently died. Asked if he ever felt that his grandfather was present or watching over him, the customer, a prominent footballer not given to flights of fancy, replied sadly that he didn’t. At that moment, a large blue butterfly

flew in the open door, circled three times around the startled man where he sat in the barber's chair, and then flew out again. He was stunned. Choked with emotion, he explained that his grandfather had had a passionate lifelong interest in butterflies.

Yet despite the power of such experiences to impress us, especially when they happen in our own lives, they remain rather poetic and elliptical in nature. They tease and suggest, but never prove. It is not as if our dead loved ones send us postcards from the afterlife telling us they're fine, or show up for Sunday roast in ghost form. Rather we are gifted with what psychologist Carl Jung termed a "synchronicity," a strikingly meaningful coincidence, as fleeting as it is moving and profound. Such experiences have the character of what used to be called "grace": a moment of divine alignment in which the world arranges itself into a symbol and, like a rainbow, meaning appears, only to fade again moments later. There is nothing here we could hope to trap in a laboratory, or make the subject of a randomised, double-blind study.

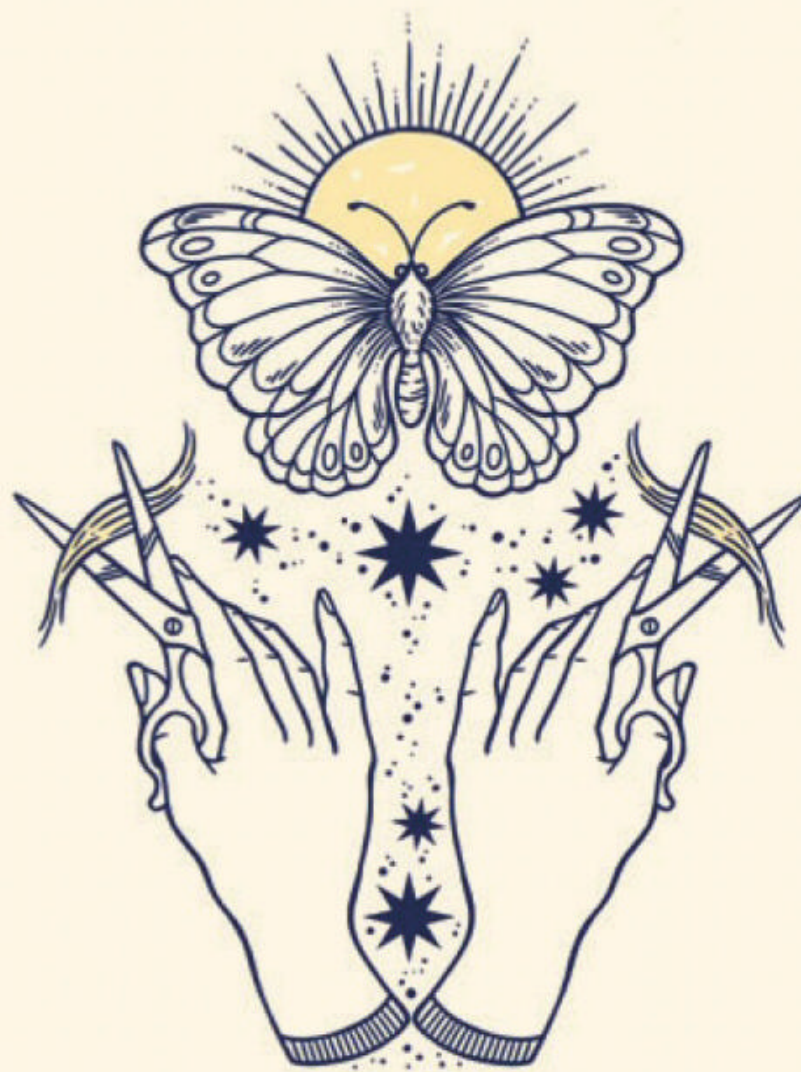
In my own life, I have always steered a course between competing crosswinds of rationality and mysticism. As a younger man, life seemed pregnant with significance and symbolism. I studied astrology and gave up a science/law degree to seek enlightenment in a six-month sojourn in India. Yet with age, the sterner, colder winds of science have tended to prevail. So much in life looks cruel and arbitrary, so much can be explained by the purely mechanical picture. Perhaps in an attempt to reconcile these parts of myself, in recent years I have made a deep study of quantum physics and the philosophy of mind, seeking the intersection of matter and consciousness. This journey has been fascinating, yet the reconciliation remains elusive. If some power exists in the universe through which a dead grandfather may reach out to his grandchild through a broken radio, or a Ulysses butterfly, it is not to be found in the subatomic interstices which my ancestor Max Born probed.

The fundamental tragedy of the human condition is that we are sentient, sensitive, meaning-driven beings in a universe that is overwhelmingly mindless, insensate and random. Wildfires burn us, tsunamis drown us. If we fall from a height, our bodies split apart according to Newton's laws. A cathedral built over centuries may be reduced to rubble in a matter of seconds by a heedless shudder of the earth's crust. The universe, it seems, is indifferent to all the delicate, fantastical structures of human art and meaning and

may blithely wipe them from the board in an instant. It's easy to conclude that we are, in the end, just matter in motion.

And yet, somehow, the grandfather's butterfly. The candlestick holder.

Is the universe, as the Ancient Greek philosopher Democritus claimed, just "atoms and the void"? Or is it, as the mystics would have it, some condensation of the breath of God, through which a divine light continues to shine, that which we call love? Our ancestors in the Garden of Eden of scientific ignorance could easily find space for gods and spirits in everything. Poseidon in the waves, Thor in the lightning. The cost of knowledge has been banishment forever from that animistic world. We have become the new gods, and the old spirits have disappeared. And yet perhaps not entirely. Perhaps they continue to speak in a language beyond reason: the strange, poetic language of dreams and the soul.



Pierz Newton-John is a writer, psychotherapist and founding faculty member of The School Of Life Melbourne.

Encounters with the Muse

Cherise Lily Nana

“If we trace the stem of the word ‘inspire’ down to its seed, we find that it means to inhale a divine beauty and to become animated with this blessing.”

A number of years ago, I started hearing whispers from a muse in the middle of the night. She met me on the page, asking me to write, *write because the trees are begging to grow their limbs through your words and their foliage through your verses*. This call continued to reverberate throughout my dreams, and over time, I began to listen. I welcomed the muse; she was responding to my yearning to unlock my voice, to break free from the chains of the inner critic and demolish the barriers that dammed my self-expression. I sensed that, buried somewhere in the mud of those waters, I would find the key to my creativity. What I didn’t anticipate from my conversations with the muse was a greater sense of meaning and a passage of self-inquiry that would ultimately guide me home.

Since that night, the muse’s presence has steadily grown in my daily life. Sometimes she brings me the sweet, sunlit perfume of jonquils in bloom and other times puzzle pieces of stories, flashes of fiction ferried from the uncharted waters of my unconscious mind. She envelops my psyche in mythic poetry and draws my attention to the way the ocean’s tides mirror the rise and fall of the breath in my belly. I hear her murmurings in meditative insight and embodied revelations, and in wild and domestic encounters with the more-than-human world.

It would appear that the muse accompanies me through not only the luminous voyages. During moments of despair she has presented me with grace, reminding me that these experiences ask me to deepen my trust and soften my walls, so that I may converge with a love that is so much bigger than the tension in my heart. She is also

an emissary for my ancestors, delivering the wisdom found in the didactic rhythms of a talking drum or the depths of a highland loch. In every one of her gifts, the muse continues to offer inspiration, beauty, and initiation into the life-affirming expression of the great mystery.

The face of the muse takes many different shapes. One depiction is the whimsical image of the genie, the firefly spirit that keeps us awake at night. Then there is that of the beloved, the people in our lives that crack open our hearts and reconnect us with parts long forgotten. The Romantic poets found inspiration in communion with the way light moved through the woods. Perhaps the most common icon that emerges when we think of a muse is the alluring and evocative—yet often passive—embodiment of the feminine. Maybe this inability to truly comprehend the muse’s elusive nature explains why the ancient Greeks divided this energy into nine goddesses.

In this mythology, the nine muses personify a very active part of our deep imagination. At heart, they are forces of nature that transcend gender, serving instead as metaphors that illustrate the many facets of our interior life. The muses are the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne. Mnemosyne, a titan and the goddess of memory, was born to Uranus, god of the heavens and Gaia, goddess of the earth. As such, the lineage of the muses upholds the union of spirit and matter. They urge us to remember this relationship through tending to the creative fire that we each carry within. Regardless of whether we are birthing an idea or project, the muses are an ally in the body of work that is the unfolding of our life story.



While the nine muses are ambassadors for many of the age-old artistic forms—poetry, storytelling, music, dance, etc.—underlying these is a devotion to the divine, and at times contradictory, qualities inherent in life itself: the comedy (guided by the muse, Thalia), the tragedy (Melpomene) and the quest for meaning in it all (Urania). Erato brings our attention to the biographies of our heart, Terpsichore to the tales of our bodies, and Calliope to the stories of our personal and collective mythology. Clio advocates the importance of connecting with our ancestors and the intangible heirlooms we’ve inherited, while Euterpe accompanies our unique melody, our sense of belonging. Finally, Polymnia is the keeper of the sounds and silence of the sacred resonating throughout the universe.

If we trace the stem of the word “inspire” down to its seed, we find that it means to inhale a divine beauty and to become animated with this blessing. The late poet, theologian and philosopher, John O’Donohue, references beauty in a transcendent language. He once said that beauty is about “an emerging fullness, a greater sense of grace and elegance, a deeper sense of depth, and also a kind

of homecoming for the enriched memory of your unfolding life.” This definition speaks to the idea that beauty is found in the most authentic expression of who we are. In this way, it thrives in the diverse ecology of our inner landscapes, in our joy and our longing, our sorrow and our fears. Beauty here is not limited merely to the visually pleasing or easily palatable. Rather, it seeks wholeness, welcoming a breadth of the alchemical elements necessary to transform visions from the unseen realms into the material world.

So how do we reconnect with the muse amongst the well-oiled machinery of modern-day life? By bringing attentiveness to that which genuinely moves us, attuning to that current that stirs the soul and enlivens the heart. We can access this state by engaging a sense of wonder within ourselves, our communities, and our earthly home. How could we incorporate more of this awe into our everyday? Could we suspend our disbelief long enough to inquire into the contents of our mythic imagination? Can we create space to turn our attention inwards towards the subtle sensations that inhabit the heart, to allow each emotion to belong, and then find compassionate outlets of expression? And on those occasions when we lose our faith, when the overwhelm of a rapidly changing landscape sinks into our bones, can we allow the balm of beauty to soothe our wounds and swaddle us in moments of solace?

In an age where so much of our technology is headed for robotic automation, we are reminded that what makes us human is the capacity to feel, to open ourselves to this ever-flowing river of inspiration and to create from this place of deep integrity. The gifts of the muses beckon us to send down our roots so that we may uplift towards the heavens, through the generative practices of wisdom and beauty that emanate from the midpoint, the heart. The Greek root word for “person” means, “the sound that passes through”. We can think of this sound as an animating force, a creative energy that literally sings us into being. If we can allow it, the inspiration received from the muse tunes our unique song to the greater rhapsody of life.

Cherise Lily Nana is a writer and editor based on Wurundjeri land in Melbourne, Australia. Her poetry and creative non-fiction explores magical realist themes, weaving the mythical and mystical with the everyday.



Illustration: Rachel Urquhart

Every Act a Ceremony

Charles Eisenstein

“Ceremony is not an escape from the messy world of matter into a hocus-pocus realm of spirituality. It is a fuller embrace of the material.”

I met a woman recently who works with a Kogi mama, or shaman, from the Sierra Nevada of Colombia. He came to California a few years ago and performed extensive ceremonies on a particular spot of land. He said, “You’d better do a ceremony here regularly, or there will be serious fires.” No one did the ceremonies, and the next year there were forest fires. He came back afterward and repeated his warning. “If you don’t do the ceremonies, the fires will be even worse.” The next year, the fires were worse. He came again and issued his warning a third time: “Do the ceremonies or the fires in this part of the world will be worse still.” Soon after that, the Camp Fire devastated the region.

Later the woman found out that the spot the Kogi shaman identified was the site of a genocidal massacre of the Indigenous people who lived there. He was somehow able to perceive that. In his understanding, a horrifying trauma like that affects the land in addition to human beings. It will be angry, out of balance, unable to maintain harmony until it is healed through ceremony.

Two years ago I met some Dogon priests and asked them about their views on climate change. Like the Kogi, the Dogon have kept ceremonial practices intact for thousands of years. The men said, “It isn’t what you people think. The biggest reason that the climate is going crazy is that you have removed sacred artifacts from the places where they belong, the places where they were placed with great deliberation and care, and removed them to museums in New York and London.” In their understanding, these artifacts and the ceremonies that surrounded them maintain a covenant between humans and the Earth.



In exchange for the payment of beauty and attention, Earth provides an environment fit for human habitation.

My friend Cynthia Jurs has been holding ceremonies for a couple of decades now in which she buries Earth Treasure Vases, Tibetan religious vessels made in a monastery in Nepal according to a specific ritual procedure. She learned the practice from—this sounds like a cliché but it actually happened—a 106-year-old Lama in a Himalayan cave. She had asked him, “How can I best serve the healing of the world?” He told her, “Well, any time you gather people to meditate, that has a healing effect, but if you want to do more you can bury Earth Treasure Vases.” Initially, Cynthia was disappointed with this suggestion. She was a devotee of Tibetan Buddhism and quite sure that it was a beautiful ceremony and all, but come on, there is real social and ecological damage that needs healing. People need to be organised. Systems have to change. What good will a ceremony do?

Nonetheless, she accepted the gift of a batch of vases that the Lama instructed be made in a nearby monastery. Five years later she began travelling the world to places where land and people had suffered great trauma to bury the vases according to the ceremonial instructions. In some of those places, miracles large and small would occur, including the mundane sort of social miracle such as the founding of peace centres. From what she can observe, the ceremonies work.

Ritual, Ceremony and Materiality

How are we to understand such stories? The politically correct modern mind wants to respect other cultures,

but hesitates to seriously adopt the radically different view of causality they hold. The ceremonies I speak of are in a different category from what the modern mind considers to be practical action in the world. Thus, a climate conference might begin by inviting an Indigenous person to invoke the four directions, before moving on to the serious business of metrics, models and policy.

I'm interested in what modern people can draw from the ceremonial approach to life, as practiced by what Orland Bishop calls "cultures of memory"—traditional, Indigenous and place-based peoples, as well as esoteric lineages within the dominant culture. This alternative is not a substitute for the rational, pragmatic approach to solving personal or social problems. Nor does it stand alongside but separate from the pragmatic approach. Nor is it a borrowing or importation of the ceremonies of other people. It is a reunion of the ceremonial with the pragmatic built upon a profoundly different way of seeing the world.

Let's start with a provisional distinction between ceremony and ritual. Though we may not recognise them, modern life is replete with rituals. Swiping a credit card is a ritual. Standing in line is a ritual. Medical procedures are rituals. Signing a contract is a ritual. Clicking "I agree to the terms and conditions" is a ritual. Filing taxes is a complicated ritual that for many people requires the aid of a priest—initiated in arcane rites and rules, fluent in a special language that the layperson can barely understand, and distinguished by the addition of honorific letters to his or her name—to properly complete. The CPA helps you execute this ritual that allows you to remain a member in good standing of society. Rituals involve the manipulation of symbols in a prescribed manner or sequence in order to maintain relationships with the social and material world. By this definition, ritual is neither good nor bad, but merely a way that humans and other beings hold their reality together.

A ceremony, then, is a special kind of ritual. It is a ritual done in the knowledge that one is in the presence of the sacred, that holy beings are watching you, or that God is your witness. Those whose worldview has no place for the sacred, holy beings or God will see ceremony as superstitious nonsense or, at best, a psychological trick, useful maybe to calm the mind and focus the attention.

Now hold on. In a worldview that does have a place for the sacred, holy beings or God, isn't it true that He or She or They are always watching us, watching everything we do? Wouldn't that make everything a ceremony?



Yes it would—if you were constantly in the felt presence of the sacred. How often is that? And how often would you, if asked, merely profess to know holy beings are watching, without actually in the moment knowing it through and through? With vanishingly few exceptions, the religious people I know don't seem to act most of the time as if they thought God were watching and listening. The exceptions transcend any specific faith. One recognises them through a kind of gravity they carry. Everything they say and do carries a kind of moment, a weight. Their gravitas permeates beyond solemn occasions to their laughter, their warmth, their anger, and their ordinary moments. And when such a person performs a ceremony, it is as if the gravity changes in the room.

Ceremony is not an escape from the messy world of matter into a hocus-pocus realm of spirituality. It is a fuller embrace of the material. It is practice in paying due respect to materiality, whether as sacred in and of itself, or sacred because it is God's masterwork. At the altar, one places the candles just so. I have an image in my mind of a man from whom I learned the meaning of ceremony. He is deliberate and precise; not rigid yet neither sloppy. Paying attention to the necessity of the moment and the place, he makes an art of each movement.

In a ceremony, one attends fully to the task at hand, performing each action just as it should be. A ceremony is therefore a practice for all of life, a practice in doing everything just as it should be done. An earnest ceremonial practice is like a magnet that aligns more and more of life to its field; it is a prayer that asks, "May everything I do be a ceremony. May I do everything with full attention, full care, and full respect for what it serves."

Ceremony From First Principles

Bringing some part of life into ceremony does not cast the rest into the category of the mundane or unceremonious. In performing the ceremony, we intend that it radiate through our day or week. It is a touchstone amidst life's *sturm und drang*. So also, we are not to merely preserve a few wild places, sanctuaries, or national parks, or restore a few places to pristine condition; rather, these places are lodestars: examples and reminders of what is possible. As people steward such places, we are called to bring a bit of them, and then more and more of them, to all places. As we establish a tiny moment of ceremony in our lives, we are called to bring a bit of it, and then more and more of it, to all moments.

How do we reintroduce ceremony in a society from which it is nearly absent? It is not to imitate or import the ceremonies of other cultures. Nor is it necessarily to resuscitate the ceremonies of one's own bloodline, an endeavour that, while avoiding the appearance of cultural appropriation, risks the appropriation of one's own culture. Ceremonies are alive though; attempts to imitate or preserve them bring us just their effigy.

What option is left then? Is it to create our own ceremonies? Strictly speaking, no. Ceremonies are not created, they are discovered.

Here is how it might work. You start with a rudimentary ceremony, perhaps lighting a candle each morning and taking a moment to meditate on who you want to be today. But how do you light the candle perfectly? Maybe you pick it up and tilt it over the match. Then where do you put the match? On a little plate perhaps, kept off to the side. And you put the candle back down just right. Then maybe you ring a chime three times. How long between rings? Are you in a hurry? No, you wait until each tone fades into silence? Yes, that is how to do it....

I'm not saying that these rules and procedures should govern your ceremony. To discover a ceremony, follow the thread of "Yes, that is how to do it," that

mindfulness reveals. Watching, listening, concentrating the attention, we discover what to do, what to say, and how to participate. It is no different than how people like Fukuoka learn right relationship with the land.

The candle may grow into a small altar and its lighting into a longer ceremony of caring for that altar. Then it radiates outward. Maybe soon you organise your desk with the same care. And your home. And then you put that same care and intentionality into your workplace, your relationship, and the food you put into your body. Over time, the ceremony becomes an anchor point for a shift in the reality that you inhabit. You may find that life organises itself around the intention behind the ceremony. You might experience synchronicity that seems to confirm that indeed, a larger intelligence is at work here.

As that happens, the feeling swells that numberless beings accompany us here. The ceremony, which only makes sense if holy beings are watching, draws us into an experiential reality in which holy beings are indeed present. The more present they are, the deeper the invitation to make more acts, indeed every act, a ceremony done with full attention and integrity. What would life be then? What would the world be then?

Full attention and integrity takes different forms in different circumstances. In a ritual it means something quite different than it does in a game, a conversation, or cooking dinner. In one situation it might demand precision and order; in another, spontaneity, daring or improvisation. Ceremony sets the tone for each act and word being aligned with what one truly is, what one wants to be, and the world in which one wants to live.

A longer version of this essay can be found on charleseisenstein.org

Charles Eisenstein is a writer, teacher and public speaker who explores civilisation, the economy, cultural evolution and consciousness. You can read our interview with him in Issue 55 of *Dumbo Feather*.



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CLAIRE DUNN IS NATURE'S APPRENTICE

Claire Dunn leads the way, barefoot, down a winding track behind her house to the banks of Birrurung, or the Yarra river. As we sit on the dry grass in the late afternoon of a 40-degree day, the cicadas chirp and there's a sense of ease despite the intense heat. The only giveaway that we are in Australia's second largest city is the distant hum of traffic. As I talk with Claire in this little patch of nature, I start to sense how, as humans, we can also find our way back to the wilder parts within ourselves. The chatter of my domesticated mind begins to fade to a distant hum.

Claire is a guide to the wilds inside and out, and her passion is nature-based human development. Since quitting her job campaigning for the Wilderness Society over a decade ago, she has travelled her own mystical path. She left the confines of the offices, shopping centres and other concrete boxes of modernity to discover something deeper, more instinctive. She spent a year in the bush, which she recounts in her memoir *My Year Without Matches*, and now runs re-wilding events and guides Vision Quests. Since settling back into city life, she's been writing a second memoir about re-wilding the urban soul.

Why does all this matter right now? One of Claire's mentors, wilderness guide and psychologist Bill Plotkins, puts it well. He says that reconnecting with nature and our own wildness "not only re-enlivens us as individuals, but also erodes the outworn Western worldview of a meaningless, disenchanted universe upon which life-assailing business-as-usual depends." For Claire, delving into direct connection with nature helps us to know ourselves more deeply, so that we can grow up and show up for each other—and for the more-than-human-world—at what is arguably one of the most crucial times for the health and longevity of the planet.

SUBJECT

Claire Dunn

OCCUPATION

Facilitator and writer

INTERVIEWER

Sylvia Rowley

PHOTOGRAPHER

Gregory Lorenzutti

LOCATION

Melbourne, Australia

DATE

December, 2019

SYLVIA ROWLEY: We're by the river in your garden in Melbourne's northern suburbs. Do you want to acknowledge the land that we're on? And also talk a bit about the wildness that's here?

CLAIRE DUNN: Sure. Well I just feel incredibly grateful to be living here. To be renting here. And it was one of those strange things where I feel like the land found me rather than me finding the land. Which happens to me with places. But I'm very aware of the long history of human caretaker-ship on this land, by the Wurundjeri people.

I've spent a lot of time on this riverbank and I've often imagined or wondered what was happening on this land. What gatherings and songs and stories were being shared here. So it is a patch of wild-ish nature in the city that I live on. And it deeply feeds me, inspires, grounds, informs my work, my days and doings.

I've been thinking about the layers of experience that are present in places. So if I go for a walk along the river here I might think it's really nice and green and I really enjoy being by the water, it's better than walking down the street in the suburbs. But if I'm with a friend who has an ecology background she might notice all the invasive species and ways in which the ecosystem has been degraded. And then if I'm with someone who can understand birdcalls then there's a whole other layer there. So I'm wondering what layers have emerged for you here?

It's a good question. 'Cause it really is a choice, you know. What am I aware of? What escapes my awareness and what am I attending to? I feel like I'm quite a generalist because I encounter the land through different layers, which overlap to form quite a rich conversation.

In one sense I encounter the land like a naturalist—identifying the birds and plants, edibles, weeds. And then there's the felt sense, how I feel in the place. What does it invite me into? What does it evoke? Then over time, and it's not something that can be rushed, there's the layer of dropping into a deeper belonging and conversation and connection. So that layer of mythical relationship with the land takes time. Just like any long-term relationship I guess. You keep uncovering layers, which cultivate this much larger story that's going on that you can tap into. Mm.

I read on your website one description of your work as "connecting to the wilds both inside and outside of us." I really liked that, and I wondered if you could talk about how you came to that path and what it means to you?

Another way of saying connecting to the "wild inside" for me is connecting to soul. Because soul is inherently wild.

Soul is that unconditioned, mysterious, untamed, undomesticated, unique individual wild core of ourselves which is inextricably connected to the mysteries of wild nature.

There's a reciprocal relationship between soul and wildness. Soul won't come to know itself inside a box. The language of soul is embedded in all the wild mirrors. Our dreams can be another expression of that wild core. So in essence we are wild. We all have our own ecological niche, our own piece in this giant puzzle—the one thing that only we can bring to the world. And a core part of the spiritual journey is discovering that. But I'll double back, how did I come to be focusing on this? Well I was always drawn to the wild. And in my early twenties became an environmental activist. So that was one way of defending the wild in a tangible way. It was a passionate calling, it consumed me. By being the voice for the voiceless, I deeply connected to the plants and animals and birds and wild ones that I was speaking for. Then during that time I started to feel a very strong calling away from that kind of work. But this calling became stronger and it wasn't a conceptual idea of "I need to do something else,"

or, “it’s time for a vocational swap.” It was kind of unbidden and unwelcome in a way, it was like, well, life’s really good and I’m being paid to do this awesome work in the world, so what’s going on here? I became very interested in exploring the human nature connection, spending solo time in nature, depth psychology, dreams, altered states of consciousness and realms of knowing beyond the rational. Because really the world I’d been working in was for the most part very rational. I started having a series of really strong archetypal dreams that were littered with wild creatures, gypsy women, images of dismemberment. Some were truly numinous encounters, both in waking life and dreams. By numinous I mean an encounter beyond the ordinary that feels like it has a strong meaning or significance for you; a communication from the mysteries. I started reading about the stage of life that is initiation and recognised that was what was calling me. I just needed to say yes to it. So the particular path I took then was studying shamanism, wilderness survival skills, tracking and nature observation, earth-based ceremony such as sweat lodge and vision quest. And I went deeply into that path, spent a year living in the bush practicing, living, experiencing, discovering, all those facets of earth-based mysticism essentially. I didn’t call it that at the time but it’s certainly what it is.

Before you carry on I’m curious about these numinous encounters. Can you describe one of those?

Yeah. So one of them was a dream. In the dream I am looking for the power tree in the forest, the largest, most powerful tree. And I find the tree, a huge spotted

gum. Around the base of the tree is a red-bellied black snake that crawled its way up my leg and I push it away in fear. I wander over to a rock ledge and pull out a stone tablet that has an Egyptian symbol on it with the words, “freedom.” And that dream has been working me ever since. The first vision quest that I did I went on a walk, still very much in that altered state. And I pretty much came across the representation of my dream in real life, with the black snake at the base of the tree.

Oh wow.

Didn’t crawl up my leg, but I sat near it and really felt into that fear. At that point I think it was fear of actualisation, fear of my power, fear of really stepping into who I am. And I’ve had other encounters with a powerful owl at the time. Really spoke to me of the world being animate and sentient and conversational. So those encounters opened up that dialogue with the more than human world. Opened the way for me to walk through the world, as if it’s a magical place that is full of mystery and symbolism and meaning. And that this relationship can really tell us something of who we really are.

And so does this idea of mysticism, if we see mysticism as a direct experiential knowing of something that is greater than our personalities and our everyday perceptions of the world, is that a word that speaks to you? Or something that’s been important to you?

I certainly resonate with the idea of it being a lived experience. For many people, spiritual life can be quite conceptual. You can just exist on a diet of podcasts and books and think

that’s it. But my feeling about mysticism is that it’s a commitment to actually walk the path. To live from that greater sense of self. To connect to the wider field of intelligence that we’re swimming in. And to realise that as a daily lived experience, or to have regular practices that connect you to that experience. There’s some sense for me of the mystic as bridging the middle world, this daily reality that we’re in, with the other worlds. Bridging ordinary reality with extraordinary reality.

How do we discern between completely projecting on our surroundings, or maybe hallucinating, versus the kind of connection that you’re talking about?

Well the Western culture has pretty much colonised our minds to be extraordinarily reliant on rational discursive thought. So much so that we think of

the word “imagination” as fantasy or flights of fancy. So it would do us well to err on the side of believing, or at least playing with or entertaining the possibility that the world is conversational and full of meaning and sentience. Opening up the possibility that the world is as interested and curious in us as we are in it. So this idea of bringing back the wild imagination. And the deep imagination really does come from that wellspring of soul and the unconscious, our dream images. And sometimes we just have to have training wheels on, just be like a child again. Or the sacred fool who steps out the front door and says, “I know nothing about this mysterious world and I’m ready to play and to praise the birds and the trees and sing to them and sing to everyone who comes along.” Just playing with that idea of the world being deeply imaginative, ourselves included. And that imagination is actually a language that connects us to that.

So you gave yourself an opportunity to open up to this wild imagination a lot more deeply by spending a whole year living in the bush in northern New South Wales. How was that?

Well it was such a precious time. I mean to have the opportunity to turn my attention so wholeheartedly to nature. I was just so curious. What happens if I take myself as

much as I can out of the Western mind and steep myself in the wild world? What happens to me? What awakens, or what drops away? And one thing was clear was I wanted to spend a lot of time alone. Even though there were others sharing the experience, there was something for me in that solitude that was very intuitively important. Well lots of things happened to me out there [laughs]. I’ll speak to it in a few different ways. Certainly some of the illusion of separateness dropped away. So that

I felt at times this deep restful belonging that is not dependent on anything, it’s not dependent on what I’m doing or who I am in any kind of external sense. It’s just inherent.

There’s nothing you have to do to get there. It’s so against all these self-help books of, you know, to achieve this mystical state we have to do this or that practice. This is the opposite. It’s just through intention and time and patience. A true state of connectedness, that true belonging. Just arises like grace. So really to be able to steep myself in that place was an incredible gift. But in a broader way what I was looking for that year was a transformational experience. I didn’t really know what that meant, just that I wanted it. In hindsight what I set myself up for was a rite of passage, within a broader initiatory period. This is something I’ve come to research a lot more ’cause I’m so fascinated by nature-based human development, and really influenced by the work of Bill Plotkin who first introduced me to the concept which then became a lived reality and one that I’ve seen mirrored in so many other people’s experience. The cosmology I’ve come to understand through myth and depth psychology and my own experience is that there are two arms or realms of the spiritual path—the upper world and the lower or underworld. We exist on the middle world day to day. The upper world pulls us to transcend, to connect to what one might call spirit or source or Great Mystery or God, to realise one’s oneness with all. It’s a well-known path in the west. But the pathway that’s been most suppressed and least understood in modern times is the underworld path, which is all the descent. Many myths take us there such as the Greek myths of Persephone or Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey which all speak of this descent to soul where one explores the mysteries of nature and psyche, and often encounters great upheaval, disintegration



and chaos in one's life. And a series of initiatory experiences that shift the centre of gravity from adolescence to adulthood. It's the capacity of the human to know its depths. To know what its soul's gifts are, and to go through the crucible in order to come out the other side and bring back the treasures for the village. In the Lord of the Rings terminology it would be going on that arduous journey to find the ring. And then returning, integrating the experience in the middle plane, in the community.

So that year for me was my kind of self-designed initiation because it really broke me open in lots of ways. It was incredibly arduous with significant ordeal and challenge, which was really important. And it regularly altered my state of consciousness so that the deep imagination and dreams were in conversation with the land, in conversation with my soul, and it shook the very foundations of my egoic structure. So all my social identity dropped away because there's just nothing to mirror it back in that environment. With it came a lot of terror. And that terror generally means you're close to something really valuable 'cause the ego is freaking out that it's not in control anymore, and that you're going to have some kind of experience that transcends the ego. Which absolutely happened—many times, often through practices like deep nature connection, through the earth skills, through my apprenticeship to fire and water and shelter, through days and days of just wandering without time or destination. Which is really what I did a lot of the time. I was like the kind of butterfly in the cocoon just really turning to mush. It was incredibly difficult and ecstatic.

Can you give an example of a hard time and of something that emerged?

Yes. I mean what started to happen in winter was I went into hibernation. And the elements were really working me. I was soot covered and lighting fires with my hands twice a day and not really seeing many other humans and I'd been there for six months. So I was really starting to drop into that very instinctive, intuitive, animal-like nature. And I was deliberately doing things to break any routines, like sleeping at different times or wandering around at night in the forest, amping up the sense of extraordinary and uncertainty. I did that primarily to train the muscle of intuition so that I was responding to the world from impulse. When do I actually want to sleep? When do I want to eat? Et cetera. And I was wandering and dancing a lot. And reading and writing. And what started to happen was all this old emotional material from childhood just started to rise up—anger and grief and fear, all of this was all very foreign to me. I didn't really know what to do with it. All I could do was let it out and trust that there was some kind of clearing going on.

One of the classic mystical analogies is becoming a hollow bone. So life can just flow through you, so creator can just flow through you.

And so it was in service of that really, becoming more of that hollow bone.

[Laugh]. Yeah. I'm laughing because I feel like I've been going through a similar process to that this year but I've had quite a lot of support. Like mentors and a counsellor. And I'm just imagining you going through that by yourself.

It was mostly by myself. I did have a mentor that I'd get on a call with once a month. And he basically said, "Just keep releasing it, keep releasing it, keep dancing it and moving it through the body." And so I dove deep into my

descent, and it was real and raw and humbling. And the grief really opened me to much deeper states of connectedness, to the spirit that moves in and through all things.

So in that moment when you felt that connection to everything, how did you feel it? Did you see images or was it in your body, or did you just know? I know it's hard to explain these things but I'm going to ask you to try anyway!

So I'm remembering one moment where I was just walking back up from the waterhole. And my mind

was pretty thoughtless. Just wasn't much chatter at all. I was walking towards the trees and their edges became fuzzy and they just appeared more three dimensional, and I could see the water flowing through them almost. And just this sense of them coming closer to me. Like this kind of ecstatic sense of connection and beauty. That's one moment of grace, one might call it mystical. They just drop in and it could be on a city street, or just suddenly having that felt, somatic, embodied sense of interconnectedness and knowledge that I am a wild magical creature like every other creature on earth.

It's funny that you say on the city streets 'cause I was thinking before this conversation, you know, have I had any experiences of these other ways of knowing? And I thought actually one that really stands out for me was when I was a teenager living in London. My mum had to have a serious operation at one stage and I was really afraid about it. I'd been at school all day and I was feeling really nervous. And as I was walking home, I passed this Italian restaurant that's just before our house, and suddenly I just knew that she was okay and that it had gone okay. And I've no way to explain it, I don't know how I knew. I just had this real felt sense of knowing.

Knowing without knowing how you know. For sure a kind of mystical experience. It makes it sound like they're really uncommon, and maybe they are, but I don't think they need to be or have been previously. I think they're available to us all the time. It's a lot to do with intention and then attention.

It's a reciprocal relationship. We're not the only ones in the conversation, you can't force it. It's like, you take yourself to bed but you can't force sleep. You just put yourself in the right conditions where grace might visit.

And what do you think people can do to open themselves up more to richer layers of experience?
And what stops us from doing that?

I guess there are small and large gestures, you could think of them as. I've just come back from guiding a vision quest.

Oh, amazing.

Which is funny 'cause when I first got Nathan's email about this edition, mysticism, I said, "Well, funny, I'm currently guiding 14 people who are right now out on a mountain for four days and nights fasting on their own." It's a contemporary practice of mysticism in a shamanic way. These people sacrifice a lot for a mystical experience. They sacrifice food for four days, they sacrifice comfort, familiarity. And when they come back in on that fifth morning, that first light, it's so exquisite. They're so unmasked. They're so raw. And I'm the lucky one who gets to hug them and welcome them back, and I can feel it now, the power of what they've experienced. So that would be one practice, but it's not a daily practice, it might be a once in a lifetime. But these experiences are available to us in a contemporary way that's designed for westerners. Smaller gestures are things like simply leaving your phone at home and wandering out in nature, which could be a city park, and playing with that invitation that everything is as interested and curious in you as you are in it. It really does open up the doors of perception.

My sit spot which is down by the river here, I leave my phone inside and go down to the river and do what one of my teachers calls, "revelling in the temples," revelling in the temples of creation. Expanding my senses to soak everything in. It's a wild state of mind. Which of course in maybe hunter-gatherer culture was probably more of the default. Less so for us. But it's not unobtainable. There's just different layers of it. I've seen people experience



significant shifts in consciousness through just wandering in the city and observing nature and tracking. Like really being curious and following your nose about what are the foxes doing and where are the birds? It's like developing a mythic relationship with the land. Like, migratory birds and animals and the movements of weather, and for me that definitely cultivates the conditions that are ripe for kind of deeper experiences of being.

You mentioned that these vision quests are not cultural appropriation, but a lot of these ways of connecting with the land, and in particular the land that we're on right now as settlers, do come from Indigenous people. And I wonder how you navigate that in your work.

Well I certainly wouldn't be interested or it wouldn't be appropriate to offer a ceremony that's particular to one culture that's not my own. But so much of the basics of these ceremonies are pan-cultural. They're not specific. Like the vision quest. There's a form of that particular kind of ceremony in so many different

cultures, of going out to fast in solitude on the land. And we so need to draw inspiration from and learn from our ancestors and their practices. From diverse cultures. We desperately need it. And there's a real danger of being so scared of doing something that could be drawn from another culture in an unintended way that we're missing out on actually engaging and creating our own ceremonies and being inspired and recognising that inspiration and weaving it in. It's a global cauldron of ceremonial practice. And, you know, what is universal is our inherent indigeneity to the earth. That can't be disputed. We are all indigenous to the earth. Our birthright is to live a life of deep connection to Earth and self and other. To celebrate the seasons and know the ecology of our place and our own place within it. To know deeply how to live well on the earth. How to celebrate, how to grieve together. How to initiate our young, how to create rites of passage. All that is universal. And we so need to claim that.

And in this particular time that we're in with the climate crisis, why do you think it's so important that we connect to the wild outside of us and also to soul, or to the inner wild? Why should we prioritise that right now?

Well the reason we've got ourselves into this mess in the first place is that

Western culture has for the most part failed to move us through the stage of adolescence.

The stage of adolescence is all about social security and ambition and social identity and so forth. And we've lost the practices that move us into true adulthood, and true adulthood is all about being eco-awakened and serving the earth community rather than just your immediate family. So if we don't learn how to initiate our culture collectively so that we are living from that soulful place, we're not going to make the shift to a life-affirming society. So this work is frustratingly urgent and terrifyingly urgent. And this other project of rewilding ourselves, rebuilding that bridge of deep connection with nature and therefore the wildness of our soul and coming to serve the earth community, that's long-term. So there's a dilemma there. But I see more and more people are hungry for soul and feeling the pull to deeply know themselves in relationship to the wild earth. So I don't know what to do about the urgency of the climate crisis versus this slower-moving current of the renaissance of soul.

And the alternative of operating more within the current structures and campaigning, which you've done, is not simple either. I know lots of people who have done that work and have burnt out with it, got very frustrated. So it's not like that's an obvious solution; all the ways of addressing it are complex.

Yeah. They are. And you know we need all the ways. We need all the ways of addressing it and supporting each other. So the activists are also engaging in their own reconnection work. And those who are swimming in the

mysteries of nature and psyche also turn up to the climate marches. We actually need to do it all. But asking ourselves the question of “what is mine to do?”—not what is someone else’s to do or what I think I should be doing, but truly what is mine to do? And for that answer to be coming not from the rational mind or the egoic structure but to be coming from that deeper current of soul and wild nature.

So we’re coming to an end in our conversation, and I wonder, when you look back on your journey so far, are there some pivotal moments where you’ve had a sense of being guided by something greater than your own will?

Well, beginning to study wilderness survival skills and going over to America and studying with trackers and a

shaman over there. These are some of the kind of external nodal points I guess. But there are subtle ones like when someone comes up and just mirrors back to you who you are. That’s incredibly powerful. Writing my book and having my book published, that felt like something I had to do. But then I tried to give up writing a couple of times. And at one point I really did, I’m like, *I’m not doing this, it’s too hard, it’s a fool’s errand*. And I was living in Bellingen at the time up on the north coast of New South Wales. And I put it in a drawer and went into town. And walked into one of those crystal shops, which is not the kind of shop I usually walk into. I was in such a strange mood I was like, “Okay, I’m just going to get a tarot reading.” Maybe the first time I’d ever done that. And this woman said to me, “You’ve got this project, this writing project. It’s really hard. Quite overwhelming. But you have to write it. It’s scripture. And here’s my card and please make sure I get a copy after you’ve finished it.”

[Laughs]. Funnily enough I did give up another time after that. But you know it really was that sense of something wants to be birthed in the world through me. And I even had dreams of like different stages of the birthing process. And me the midwife throughout that time. It was incredibly difficult. But there was absolutely a sense looking back of something wanting to move through me. And Elizabeth Gilbert talks about that so beautifully, the muse wanting to move through you. And that ideas have independence, if you don’t seize the idea then it’ll go knocking on someone else’s door. So it’s that idea of needing to be open enough and receptive enough for creation to move through, like the hollow bone. And it really did feel like that with my book. As much as I struggled with it.

Yeah. I guess that’s one of the hallmarks of following a deeper calling—that it’s not necessarily what you think you want [laughs]. Or what’s easy to do.

Yes, you get what you need, not necessarily what you want. I feel like the foundational kind of one-liner that facilitates some sense of mystical life for me is really surrendering to what life is offering. Really surrendering to how life is showing up for you. Fighting against reality is no fun. And there’s just such an ease and trust and acceptance that comes with that surrender. To say, “Okay, I’m going to stop scrambling, I’m just going to let go of the bank and enter the river, have fun, navigate the rapids and see where it takes me.” 



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MATTHEW FOX IS A COSMIC PRIEST

For more than 50 years, Matthew Fox has been studying and writing about the great Christian mystics through history, gleaning from them something much richer and more truthful about what it means to live a holy life than the Roman Catholic Church he was intimately connected with. At age 19, Matthew entered the Dominican Order of the Church and took an alternate route, earning a doctorate of spiritual theology from the Institut Catholique de Paris and becoming a champion of the Creation Spirituality tradition, which puts the sacredness of the Earth and cosmos at the centre of Christian life, and draws inspiration from social justice, science, Indigenous wisdom and other world religions. Importantly, Matthew recognised what many mystics before him had: that the origin of life doesn't begin with sin, as the Catholic Church teaches, but rather with blessing.

In the early '90s, Matthew was silenced by the Vatican and later expelled from the Dominican Order for failing to fall in line with the Church teachings. The papacy came at him with a list of wrongdoings, including referring to God as "Mother," supporting homosexuals, working too closely with Native Americans, and emphasising the concept of "original blessing" over "original sin." He wasn't hindered, and continued to develop and teach his programs on spirituality which incorporate intellectual and intuitive ways of learning. In his efforts to renew forms of ritual and worship for young people, he developed what have famously become "Cosmic Masses," a blending of meditation, VJ, DJ and dance, and after having designed Masters programs and even a university on Creation Spirituality through the '80s and '90s, he founded the holistic education organisation YELLAWE (Youth and Elder Learning Laboratory for Ancestral Wisdom Education) in 2005. Today, Matthew continues to write and run workshops on eco-centred mysticism in action, giving people, as he's always intended, the resources, concepts and—most importantly—experiences that enable them to be in relationship with the Divine.

SUBJECT

Matthew Fox

OCCUPATION

Priest and theologian

INTERVIEWER

Nathan Sclaro

PHOTOGRAPHER

Angela DeCenzo

LOCATION

Benicia, US

DATE

January, 2020



MATTHEW FOX: Our hearts are going out to you all in Australia right now, watching these devastating bushfires. The loss of life and of course the frustration at the lack of leadership. We are with you and are feeling it here on the other side of the world.

NATHAN SCOLARO: Thank you. Actually I was heartened by something I read on your website this morning, because obviously there's lots of talk here about this feeling apocalyptic, people are scared about what's to come. But you wrote that a time of apocalypse can be a time for genuine breakthroughs, for maturing and coming of age. And this is something that really resonates with me. I feel like this is a time for us to grow up. Do you want to speak to that maybe, this framing of the word apocalypse?

Yes. The word apocalypse in Greek can be translated as revelation. It could be a moment of revelation about the depths of our species. Our capacity for creativity and compassion could come forward because we're in so much trouble. And the old adage is that necessity is the mother of invention, nothing changes until it has to—that humans don't really react until we're made to with crisis. I do think that the crises we're facing today are just undeniable, except for

those who choose to go into denial like your leader and mine. It's not just my president here in America, an entire political party is pretending that they can hide their head in the sand about climate change. It's really beyond belief, except when you recognise that human nature is capable of rationalising everything. Until it's too late. So I see this crisis as an occasion, an opportunity, for humans to wake up. And to look deeper inside. That's where the mystical comes in. Because the mystical is about our experiences of awe and therefore gratitude and reverence, not taking for granted. That's what the mystics call the "via positiva." And then the "via negativa" is about letting go. Letting go in terms of going into silence, letting go of noise and the monkey mind, or just letting go of habits that are literally destroying the earth. It celebrates our capacity for deep emptying and changing of our ways. So, the mystical journey is an important one today because it is a question of how much we love the earth and our existence, and how much we are willing to change, to let go of, to live lives that are more benign toward future generations, not just of humans but of all the creatures that are striving to thrive on this beautiful planet.

That term "via negativa," I want to unpack it a bit more and understand what the mystics said about it. These of course are terms used by the Christian mystics many years ago.

There are two directions for the via negativa. The first is silence. So it's that emptying of the mind that precedes creativity. Meister Eckhart says, "I once had a dream. I dreamt that although I'm a man, I was pregnant. Pregnant with nothingness. And out of this nothingness God was

born." So out of great emptiness all kinds of things can be born. Creativity requires an emptying. It requires starting over as opposed to just tampering with things the way they are. So nothingness can be a very positive experience. That's one aspect of the via negativa. The other is suffering and grief, and I believe everyone on the planet now is grieving consciously or unconsciously, and we need practices, rituals, to pay attention to the grieving. One shaman taught me this grief practice where you take a round hand drum and beat it daily for 15 minutes. And let the sounds out of your third chakra, the gut, which is where we hold our grief and anger. The teaching is that you're riding the horse into the land of grief. It's brilliant because anger gets attended to. I've also dealt with grief with large groups. In our cosmic masses we always include a grieving process where I get everyone down on all fours, which is really all sixes. And the forehead on the floor, so it's sevens. Once again you're paying attention to the third chakra and let the sound come out. It's very, very powerful. All kinds of sounds come out. And that's what we have to do. We have to let the pain out. You can't be sitting on grief. If we ignore grief we're not going to be creative. Grief is like a big rock, a boulder in the heart that prevents creativity from happening.

That really resonates for me. For the past three weeks I haven't been doing any kind of practice. I've been on holidays with family and that's always an intense time. And I had this moment of real rage, which is not common for me, where I just kind of let all this anger out at my brother. There was shouting and tears and it was uncontrollable. Like I had never experienced that before. And I felt, on reflection, it was exactly what you're saying. Unprocessed grief for everything that's going on, misdirected through anger.

Well there's a lot of anger in the world today and when I see that, the first thought I always have is, *What are people grieving?* That's how we should approach anger I think, first by way of processing grief. Because

that's probably what's really lighting the fire. So how we process that grief is important, it's not just a matter of the fifth chakra or talking. You carry grief in your bones, it's in our muscles, our bodies. In the cosmic masses we are bringing rave into liturgy. We're bringing postmodern art forms, DJ, VJ, rap and so forth into worship service. It's all about helping people wake up, and reinventing forms of worship that can really assist us. Ritual or ceremony is the way our species has done this for hundreds of thousands of years. The modern age was about text and reading because it launched at the time of the invention of the printing press. Premodern people prayed by dancing and drumming and being much closer to the earth where the lower chakras are engaged. So I see ritual as a shortcut for teaching big stories and for gathering the energy of a community.

So you've been somewhat of a rebel in your time. Obviously creating a cosmic postmodern mass is one deviation from the doctrine of the Catholic church. And also you were quite challenging in that you identified two other mystical paths, beyond the via positiva and negativa we were discussing before.

Yes. So as I mentioned the via negativa has to do with letting go, it's the emptying required to create something, so the via creativa comes next, the creative path. And

I think that many people have mystical experiences in the act of creativity—whether it's musicians writing music, or painters painting, or lovers making love, or people growing and cooking their food.

This creativity is what really distinguishes us as a species. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th Century said, "The same spirit that hovered over the waters at the beginning of creation hovers over the mind of the artist at work." So that's the birthing that happens in the via creativa and it is the Holy Spirit working through us. Then the via transformativa is the fourth path, which is about steering the creativity in the direction of compassion and justice. That's really important for transforming the world in a way that honours creation. So you can see how each of these four paths lead into one another. The image I use is a spiral where it's ever-expanding, so that when there's more justice, what follows is more joy and beauty and delight for people, so you move from the via transformativa back into the via positiva.

And then how might this play out? I mean, I think we're already starting to unpack what it means to look at the world in a mystical way. But what does it mean for you personally, in your day-to-day?

A mystical view of the world for me is, I'm going to say, being able to observe the sacredness of all things. There's a wonderful poem by Mary Oliver, "At the River Clarion." Let me get it. She writes: "I don't know who God is exactly. But I'll tell you this. I was sitting in the river named Clarion, on a water splashed stone and all

afternoon I listened to the voices of the river talking. Whenever the water struck the stone it had something to say. And the water itself, and even the mosses trailing under the water. And slowly, very slowly, it became clear to me what they were saying. Said the river I am part of holiness. And I too, said the stone. And I too, whispered the moss beneath the water.” For me that is a marvellous summary of the teaching of the cosmic Christ in our Christian tradition, the Buddha nature in the Buddhist tradition, and tzelem, the image of God, in the Jewish tradition. That everything is another Buddha, everything is another image of God and everything is another Christ. And it’s an affirmation of the sacredness of the world. Then she goes on to say, “I’d been to the river before, a few times. Don’t blame the river that nothing happened quickly. You don’t hear such voices in an hour or a day. You don’t hear them at all if selfhood has stuffed your ears. And it’s difficult to hear anything anyway through all the traffic and ambition.” So now she’s talking about the via negativa, about how we have to let go of stuff in our minds, in our projections and the rest to really experience what’s there.

Mm. And then one last stanza. “God isn’t just churches and mathematics. He’s the forest. He’s the desert. He’s the icecaps that are dying. He’s the ghetto and the museum of fine arts. He’s van Gogh and Allen Ginsberg and Robert Motherwell. He’s the many desperate hands cleaning and preparing their weapons. He’s every one of us potentially. The leaf of grass, the genius, the politician, the poet. And if this is true, isn’t it something very important?” So I think that’s a mystical way of seeing the world, a world that it is permeated with the radiance of the divine and we’re here to unpack that and of course we’re part of it. There’s a radiance in us too. Thomas Merton, the Catholic monk, had that experience one day at noon time on the streets in Louisville near his monastery. He was there in rush hour, and suddenly everyone was luminous to him. He could see the light in everyone. The next day he wrote in his journal, “How is it possible to tell everyone that they’re walking around shining like the sun?” That was a mystical experience. I think there are breakthroughs like that for all of us in different circumstances. And that doesn’t exclude being able to see the evil around us too. In fact we can’t fight evil without an experience of the sacred I don’t think. The opposite of evil is not good. Bad is the opposite of good. The opposite of evil is the sacred. That realisation is very important, that we have to build ourselves up with this experience of the sacred and in doing so take on the real powers of evil. Thomas Berry has a brilliant teaching on that when he says, “It’s been said we will not save what we do not love. But we will not love what we do not consider as sacred.” He is warning us that the future of ecology depends on our recovering this sense of the sacred.

I was thinking then, how much are we imagining is in this relationship between us and the world? What is the role of our imaginations in imbedding the sacred? Do you know what I mean?

Yes. And that’s the via creativa of the mystics that really moves us into the prophetic. A philosopher, William Hocking, said a hundred years ago that the prophet is the mystic in action. The mystic is the lover, the prophet is a warrior who defends what one cherishes. So there’s a dance

there in being both mystic and prophet. The mystic says, “Yes,” the prophet says, “No.” A full adult spiritually is both mystic and prophet. So you don’t want to stop at the mysticism. You invest the mysticism, because as we said it is about being a lover. But we also need to defend what is threatening what one loves, what’s threatening the Beloved. Sometimes people think of mysticism as simply one’s own transformation, but no, that’s not enough. You’ve got to take it into transforming structures in society that interfere with love, and that’s about abolishing injustices. Which is especially needed today. So more and more people have to wake up and go deeper inside. The answers are not all there for us to follow in some kind of manual [laughs]. Or catechism. We need group wisdom. And group anger. But to deal with it

in effective ways, like Gandhi taught us and King and Mandela taught us, that there's a way of lassoing anger or outrage so others don't get hurt by it, that's what non-violence organising is all about. And of course drawing on science to make our resistance more effective, and not repeating the destructive modes, like war and the rest, that evolved and often overtook us as a species in the past. We have to tame the reptilian brain which is currently running away with our species.

Well one thing you've been a huge advocate for is wisdom education and I was very inspired reading about how you've built that into your Creation Spirituality and YELLAWE model, the uniting of science and spirituality. And you wrote that the learning is based on the fact that the body is first and foremost an expression of the universe, 13.7 billion years of cosmic wisdom and matter, which is such a profound concept.

Yes, and the new cosmology, with all that we know, is such an aid today in becoming more mystical and more grateful. Because it's true that our bodies carry the history of the universe in them. We literally share the molecules of the other planets and the hydrogen and helium from the fireball.

And further elements like magnesium from the supernova explosion. We're cosmic beings. Aquinas says, "The greatest thing about the human person is this: we are capable of the universe." That's an amazing statement, especially from a theologian from the 13th Century. Of course now with this new cosmology it's even more exciting knowing that we've been in the universe for two trillion galaxies, each with hundreds of billions of stars, and here we are. We're a small modest species that can actually think about these things and learn about these things and talk about them. It's a wondrous existence. So the new cosmology is a tremendous ally in upping the ante on awe and wonder, and therefore the *via positiva*. But also it can motivate us, once we realise how precious but also how vulnerable our species is and this planet is, it can wake us up to our responsibility. To be agents of transformation, to be prophets. Aquinas also said, "I believe a mistake about creation results in a mistake about God." So obviously we have to study creation, and who does that for us? Scientists. You can't get anywhere if you turn your back on science. Religion has had major points in history such as the 17th Century when science and religion have split. The church burnt Giordano Bruno at the stake, he was a Dominican trying to bring Copernicus' thought into theology and they burned him. That's when science said, "Oh, these believers can be kind of dangerous so let's work out a truce. Why don't you believers take the soul and we'll take the universe?" And the result was that science ran off with very little conscience, discovered the power of the universe and all that, and religion became more and more introspective and silly. And we were living in a very schizophrenic world. Now

that's changing because science is becoming more mystical, what they're finding is that things are not things, things are relationships.

That's a very mystical insight. Also, things are utterly interdependent. That's a very mystical insight, both Eckhart and Hildegard talk a lot about interdependence. So the mystics were ahead of the scientists on that. Now there's this growing consensus between the two. And of course interdependence is a basis of compassion. Eckhart said, "Whatever happens to another, whether it be a joy or a sorrow, happens to me." Well that's compassion. So science is moving away from mechanism and materialism. Not all of it, but a lot. And if religion can get back to spirituality, and especially Creation Spirituality, then that would bring depth. The Dalai Lama is pushing this. A lot of scientists are now studying meditation—how it

changes the brain and our physiology and the rest. So there's actually some tremendous potential there but meanwhile we're burning the planet up. It's a very raucous time. And, you know. Will our species survive? Well not the direction it's going it won't.

I'd love to draw out some of your story now. Which I know is quite extraordinary, having had what I assume was a very formal religious experience with the Dominican Order of the Catholic church. I thought we could start with how the mystical lens of Christianity came to you.

One important moment in my childhood was when I got polio at age 12. And I lost my legs and they couldn't tell me if I'd ever walk again. About a year later I was able to walk again. I remember how grateful I was to the universe for having legs to walk with. I said to myself, "I will

never take my legs for granted again." I think that's a very mystical approach to living. In meditation practice we're told to pay attention to our breath. So not to take our breath for granted, which is pretty good advice. But we do take it for granted. You can be present for a newborn baby and it's a great event. The first breath. You can be present when someone dies and that's a special event, the last breath. But in between we're just breathing, we're not aware, we're not grateful. So when I look back I think that was quite formative for me, the experience of the *via negativa*, of letting go of my legs. And then having them returned. I grew up in Wisconsin which is quite a rural state. It's very beautiful and we have all four seasons pretty severely, a lot of lakes. So I grew up close to nature. And the Native American tradition is still strong in the land in Wisconsin so I had lots of Native American dreams when I was young. Then growing up in a big family, seven kids, we were raised Catholic and I enjoyed mass a lot, it meant a lot to me especially as a kid, even a teenager. I went to public high school and I'd have these philosophical debates with friends who were Jewish or agnostic or Protestant and I would go back to my parish priest who was Dominican. And he'd have me reading GK Chesterton and Thomas Aquinas, which I really enjoyed. When I was a senior in high school I did a retreat with Dominicans, and I was very moved by the intellectual life because I like to read and learn. And I was moved by the sense of community, a lot of people living and working together. So I said I was going to give this a shot, so when I graduated from high school, I went to college and joined the Dominicans. I loved my training. I had a lot of mystical experiences. Of course they had practices from fasting to chanting and all this that bring these things alive, at least they did for me. And the study. I spent one summer in a hermitage to explore what that life was like, and that was a very freeing experience, on Victoria Island off Canada. I remember going to my superiors, this was in the early 60s, saying, "My generation will be less interested in religion and more interested in spirituality. And we don't have anyone on the faculty with a doctorate of spirituality. So you should send someone on it. And I'm happy to volunteer." [Laughs]. They came to me several months later and said, "Well good news! You can go to Europe and get a doctorate in spirituality." So then I thought about where to go and I wrote to Thomas Merton and asked him, and he said, "Go to Paris to the Institut Catholique." And that's where I ended up. I was very grateful for it. That's where I met my mentor, Pere Chenu, a French Dominican who was then 75 which I thought was very old. I don't think that anymore!

[Laughs]. Chenu named the Creation Spirituality tradition for me as distinct from the fall-redemption tradition. And that set me on my way.

Can you tell us a bit about Creation Spirituality? Well Creation Spirituality begins, and this is my language, with the concept of original blessing, not original sin. Because it's not anthropocentric. It doesn't begin with the human tradition, it begins with the universe. And of course Genesis 1 is all about the universe and it's all about good.



And “very good.” That’s what blessing means. So why do we begin the life story with Adam’s fall? I learned early in my teaching career from Jewish students that Jews don’t believe in original sin. But the Adam and Eve story’s there, so what have we projected onto the Jewish tradition? Then I did my research and it’s St Augustine who came up with original sin in the fourth century. Jesus never heard of it. And of course the fourth century is also the century that the church inherited the empire. If you’re aspiring to run an empire, the Roman empire, original sin is a great idea because it keeps everyone in line. But the church never really defined it, it was a vague thing. So if you’re a woman, maybe that’s original sin. If you’re gay, maybe that’s your original sin. Or if you’re black or brown or whatever. I mean it’s a horrible teaching. I remember someone saying to me, “Not only is original sin not in our Jewish Bible, it’s contrary to Jewish thinking.” So it’s just appalling really, and amazing that the Christian church in the west has held onto that concept for so long. Obviously it has certain political interest. But it’s terrible psychology, it’s terrible sociology and it’s terrible theology. Not good. Jesus never heard of it. What the hell are you doing preaching a religion in the name of Jesus that teaches something he’s never heard of!

Right! So I’ve been running with this theology ever since. And I found it in the great mystics. I just finished a new and short book on Thomas Aquinas called *The Tao of Thomas Aquinas: Fierce wisdom for Hard Times*. He spoke a lot about “original goodness.” In my first book on Hildegard of Bingen I cite her talking about “original wisdom.” We were born with original wisdom. Aquinas talks about it as original goodness. So it’s interesting. They were coming up with their own language around this. Then Julian of Norwich talks about how “goodness is God.” Again she’s very immersed in this lineage of Creation Spirituality. So it’s all there. Anyway, I went to Paris and got my doctorate and I came back and started writing and teaching spirituality and developing these ideas and creating programs—a master’s program and a doctorate of ministry program and then an inner city program for teenagers around these values. All the time I was developing an alternative educational model that balances left and right hemispheres of the brain. YELLAWE was a program for inner city youth that used art as meditation, that focused therefore on creativity as a practice. Some people when they hear the word meditation think, *Oh, sitting on a cushion*. Well that’s one kind of meditation. But there are many kinds. Art as meditation has been called “the way of the prophets”—that’s what I’m interested in.

How do you teach people to meditate so that it moves into social transformation?

My programs would have dance as meditation, massage meditation, music, clay, painting as meditation. These are the forms that I think lead more to prophetic work than contemplative meditations.

I’m keen to get to the period in your story where you’re in the Dominican Order, doing this incredible work that’s probably also quite challenging for some people. And then you’re actually silenced by the Vatican.

Yeah well when the Vatican came after me, they had a list of seven objections to my work. Number one, that I’m a feminist theologian. I didn’t know that was a heresy. I still don’t know that it is. Second was that I called God “Mother.” Well I proved that all medieval mystics called God “Mother.” Then that they refuted this concept of “original blessing,”

they were really rattled by that—that’s when I learned how invested patriarchy is in original sin. Another objection was that I don’t condemn homosexuals. That I work too closely with

Native Americans. Now I don't really know what that means, "too closely," but I have derived great benefit spiritually from Native American practices and teachers. Vision quests and sun dances and sweat lodges, all that's been very important for my own spiritual grounding. Another complaint was that I prefer the four paths of spirituality as we talked about. So anyway, that was their feeble objection to my work. The bottom line was that they silenced me the same year they silenced Franciscan theologian Leonardo Boff in Brazil who was the most read Catholic theologian in South America, and the same year they silenced Eugene Drewermann, a well-read theologian in Europe who was a psychiatrist and a priest. And I was at the time the most read theologian in North America. So obviously it was a political act, they were trying to shut up theologians. Anyway, I went silent for a year and then they came after me again, and about three years after that they expelled me from the Dominican Order to which I had belonged in good standing for 34 years. At that time I was finishing my book, *The Reinvention of Work*, and the last chapter was on reinventing ritual. I met these young people from Sheffield, England who were Anglican. They were very heavy in the rave movement in Sheffield and they brought their rave liturgy into the Anglican church. I went to check it out and I was very impressed with what I saw. I said, "How can I help?" They said, "If you became an Episcopal priest you could help and lead interference for us. We are already using your theology on the Cosmic Christ so you get what we are doing." I thought about it and prayed on it and I realised, well, the Pope had fired me, he doesn't need me anymore. So I went to the Episcopal bishop in San Francisco and said, "Here's the deal. I'll become Episcopalian but only for one reason, to reinvent forms of worship working with young people." And he gave me a green light on that. That's how I became an Episcopal priest.

Incredible. I feel like that also speaks to the kind of silencing of mysticism in our culture. You know, what happened to you has been happening for centuries across Western civilisation, and dramatically shaped our societies. So much so that mysticism has very little validity in our culture today, it's handled with bucketloads of cynicism and kind of shunned to the margins.

Theodore Roszak says that in the modern era "the worst offence against science and reason was mysticism." Fortunately we have—supposedly—moved on to the postmodern era which means incorporating wisdom from the premoderns who were not so scared of mysticism. But the mystical often comes up against the institution. Institutional people are more into what Jung would

call the "thinking function." Mystics are more into the intuitive functions. There's kind of a natural conflict there. But what happened to me was political too, of course, in that a lot of people were reading my work and responding strongly. Wherever patriarchy reigns there's envy. So envy had a lot to do with it too. That's why control becomes a number one project in patriarchy. My provincial at the time actually told *The New York Times* when they interviewed him about me, he said, "Well, the church and society have moved to the right and Matthew Fox has not." He was trying to say how disobedient I was, but I took that as a compliment.

[Laughs]. It feels like some of the most important work we can do now, especially with everything that's happening around us, is to reclaim—as you've been doing for a long time—the mystical.

Carl Jung said, "Only the mystics bring what is creative to religion." You can't renew religion without mysticism. Jesus was a mystic and Buddha was a mystic. But to renew it you also have to recognise what's missing, what's failing. For people wanting to deepen their experiences as mystics, there are practices, and of course studying the mystics is a good thing. So find out what meditation practices work for you at this time in your life. Because such things evolve as one evolves. But above all, it's about trusting your experience of awe and wonder, via positiva, and finding ways to go into silence. Trusting your experiences of darkness and suffering and grief also. 

MONICA GAGLIANO COMMUNICATES WITH PLANTS

Monica Gagliano is one of those rare scientists who has the courage to walk her own path through a field of sceptics and critics. Having forged a successful career as a marine scientist, she followed a deep curiosity emanating from her own backyard to start studying plant behaviour. Over a period of time, she was able to perform groundbreaking research which demonstrated that learning, memory and decision-making are not exclusive to the animal world.

Growing up in northern Italy, Monica now works in universities across Australia, and has pioneered the research field of “plant bioacoustics,” which looks at the ways plants emit their own voices and detect and respond to sounds in their environment. Her work has been featured in David Attenborough’s documentary series, *Natural Curiosities*. As well as authoring numerous scientific articles, Monica recently released a book titled *Thus Spoke the Plant*—a remarkable journey of groundbreaking scientific discoveries and personal encounters with plants. The book’s message is threefold: to show that the plant world is conscious and that it is consciously supporting us even if we are not aware; that we all have a unique path to walk and if we stop and listen to our plant friends that path can be shown to us; and that the plant world is calling for our deep respect and co-operation, and it is crucial now that we listen.

SUBJECT

Monica Gagliano

OCCUPATION

Evolutionary ecologist

INTERVIEWER

Sally McKern

PHOTOGRAPHER

David Maurice Smith

LOCATION

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SALLY MCKERN: I've been inspired by your openness to go into the unknown and to learn from nature, returning with all sorts of gifts that you have had the courage to share through your scientific work and now through your book, from your most personal perspective. And I'm curious about the scientific and personal experience of communicating with plants, which some may see as being quite esoteric. Do you see yourself as bringing science to esoteric ideas?

MONICA GAGLIANO: For me there is nothing esoteric about communicating with plants, or more generally with nature. In fact the more I travel and connect with people, the more normal I see it is. It makes me

think of a quote by Nietzsche, who said the facts of today will be the fables of tomorrow. I think we can invert that because we have had a big fable about not communicating with plants, and now the opposite of that is becoming the fact of tomorrow, or today really. More and more, for example, I'm seeing colleagues engage scientifically with the fact that plants are using sound to communicate with humans and other creatures. So I think it's just a matter of time that this will be normalised; it will be like, oh yeah, we have always known this on some level and now we're just fully embracing it!

Do you think we can use science to fully understand this relationship between plants and humans?

Well I would say that really depends on what we think science is. For me, science is first of all about personal experience and through personal experience you can acquire knowledge, which of course is always relative anyway. And through that you might be lucky to have a glimpse of a truth, which again will be relative. So if science is a tool to gain knowledge—through the personal experience—and get us closer to a truth, then surely the truth that is in the connection between plants and humans can emerge through science. But I don't think that we should take any one tool, science included, as the most legitimate way of understanding something, because we are much more than that. I would say that

the relationship between plants and humans is like that between friends, or lovers, or mother and child. Would you really want science to fully deconstruct those relationships? Probably not.

And even if we wanted to, I don't think we can. It's good that we let life keep its secrets and don't explain everything in materialistic terms. We can maybe explain what hormones are triggering in these relationships, what's making you happy and relaxing you, but that doesn't say anything about the exchange itself. So I guess the short answer to your question is no. But surely science can provide a lot of beautiful insights which can enrich the relationship rather than fully explain it. I don't think that is the point of science anyway.

Can you talk a bit about your personal experience of communicating with plants?

So, like many, I think I've been doing this since I was a child. Of course, when you are a child there is no inhibition or conditioning telling you that you shouldn't be talking to plants. So I guess it's a natural process of connecting the adult self to that child inside and de-conditioning certain ideas so that we might hear and listen to the world around us. The experience itself is unspeakable really. I can talk about it but it won't provide any real sense unless you've experienced it. Same as trying to explain what love is if the person you're explaining it to has never loved. The good news is that we are made of plants. Just consider how much plant material we ingest every day. All our cells are generated by our consumption of their vegetal bodies. So it is unsurprising that I would describe my personal experience of communicating

with plants as something quite embodied. It's grounded in those roots and leaves I eat every day, it's in the bark and flowers I steep to make my tea. There's nothing weird or special about it. And yet, how amazing this love affair is! So communication with plants is a pretty simple thing and simultaneously the most mysterious of things.

My sense is that listening is key to fostering this relationship, surrendering to it almost, is that true to say?

Yeah, it is like any other communication in that I am required to listen. So you're not thinking or talking, you are empty and attentive so that what is being spoken arrives and enters you. Some ideas I have really never considered until the plants mention them. And like any relationship, the communication gets better and better as you invest more time and more care into nurturing that relating. I think we are in communication with everything all the time; whether we do it consciously or not is a different question. So what we are talking about here is just bringing that communication to the conscious mind so that we are engaging actively rather than being passively part of the picture.

You worked for many years as a marine scientist and now you say you are very much a student of plants. What drew you to move towards plants as teachers, and what keeps you going deeper into this world?

I never would have thought I would be working with plants, as a scientist, or otherwise. I still know very little about them. The shift from the marine to the plant world happened by chance, or so it seemed at the beginning. My partner and I just moved to Western Australia from Queensland for new positions at a university. And in our new home we had the opportunity to create a garden. I had left the marine research world and was often in tears, basically grieving a career and a sphere that was leaving me, and I was spending a lot of time in the garden planting and trying to enrich the soil. The climate in Perth can be really harsh and in the beginning we just put the plants in and hoped they would do something good—of course they didn't! So the garden was calling for our attention all the time. I think it was through this process that we became attached to the ones who were making it! [Laughs].

It became a very personal affair because we were spending so much time looking at these plants every day, hoping they were going to still be alive tomorrow.

So this process of detaching myself from marine science overlapped, and in the space where they overlapped, the next iteration of myself as a scientist emerged. I was still the same scientist of course, and in fact I realise in hindsight that I was still interested in the same questions, but I was applying them to a different space. All of this overlapped with my growing interest in herbal medicine. We had just come back from a long trip in India and I was studying Ayurveda, I was very much into it. My partner was my guinea pig and he would take all the concoctions I was making. Then I started volunteering in a herbal clinic once a week with a very good herbalist who made his tinctures from scratch. I helped to harvest the plant parts he needed, and eventually I was taking care of the entire process right through to when the person comes into the clinic and is given their tincture. So it was really good for me to understand the medicinal properties of many plants. Sometimes he would send me out saying, "We're going to make a flower essence of this plant, so go and ask the plant's permission." I realised I had been doing that a lot anyway, but this time I was actually invited to really engage with it. So the learning was



much more embodied. I am very thankful to him because he really opened the door for me to explore aspects that the scientist in me would have tried to push away. Then in the midst of all of this the plants themselves were like, “Well, you can work with us, you know. We don’t mind.” And so I started doing that, without necessarily advertising that I was doing that. Then I started asking questions which, scientifically speaking, I think are totally relevant. Like, *How do plants communicate? Do they communicate? Can they learn? Do they remember?* Questions that, if you ask them of an animal, nobody would blink, because we’ve been asking these questions for a long time. So it was nothing extraordinary really. But it was interesting to see the reaction around me by my colleagues. Some were curious, others were indifferent, and others were openly quite disturbed. They’d say: “These are not the questions that we ask.” And my reaction was, “What kinds of questions do we ask?”

Of course for a long time there was this dichotomy within me, between the part interested in the herbalistic and shamanic arts and the spiritual aspect of the self, and the part that was the academic scientist who takes a more materialistic approach to describing things. At the beginning I felt it was really important to keep them very separate because I didn’t want to muddy the waters. I wanted to be a serious scientist. And I did that for a while, for almost 10 years. I would be at work and some colleagues perceived me like there was something strange about me. So it was a fine line that I was walking, but

in the end the line was blurred and it was very clear that the scientist and the spiritual self, if you want to call it that, had to be unified.

I’m starting to get a sense of what a hard slog it must be for you as a scientist willing to go outside of the accepted norms of the scientific world. And how courageous you have to be to present your work in the first place to a bunch of experts who are so quick to pull you apart because of the questions you ask. And also the language you use. Words like “intelligence,” “memory” and “learning,” words which have only been used to describe animal behaviour in the past. Why do you think there is so much resistance to applying these terms to plants? And why do some people feel that it is necessary to keep a clear distinction between the plant and animal world?

I have been accused of misusing certain words but this just reveals an unspoken assumption that we know what those words mean. So in the context of “intelligence,” for example, we associate it with the idea that you need to have a brain. Well, I always define my words as I use them, so in this case I would use the Latin definition: “choosing between.” So if an organism is able to choose between, it fits the definition of what intelligence is. Intelligence doesn’t speak of brains, it doesn’t speak of neurons; it speaks of a process, of choice and

decision making. Are plants able to make choices and decisions? Yes. They make them all the time. Does any organism have to do that? Yes. Otherwise it wouldn’t survive. Similarly, one of the biggest assumptions we hold is about consciousness and the idea that consciousness necessarily emerges from the brain. This is the big discussion that has recently resurfaced in the scientific world, although it really never left us. The association between consciousness and the brain is just an idea. Why should that one idea be better than another? No reason, except that we have told one story more often and come to believe it as a fact. And yet, we could tell the story about consciousness in a totally different way. For example, the idea that consciousness is the substrate out of which everything else emerges, including the brain and the neurons. This changes the questions we ask and the science we do. Recently I had an experience during a meditation with the sacred cacao plant which gave me some great

insights. So this is the plant chocolate comes from, of course. It's a beautiful plant teacher that I have been working with over the past decade, ceremonially and also for my own physical wellbeing because in its raw form it is packed full of goodness. Anyhow, in the vision the cacao delivered, initially, there was just blackness. Then out of the black background, I saw something luminous emerging. At first, it looked like the faint details of a spider web, not complete, but little light threads. Then the picture changed slightly and felt like it was a neural network. The words that came with this vision were: "Can you see how the dots of light that create this picture come and go? There is one thing that doesn't come and go, and it's the blackness behind. That's what consciousness is." Thus spoke the plant! [Laughs].

[Laughs]. Wow. You've done some incredible experiments with plants. I want to talk about the plant *Mimosa pudica* and the research you did, which was referred to in a *New Yorker* article by Michael Pollan called "The Intelligent Plant." What did that experiment teach you about plant behaviour and cognition?

Mimosa was already famous, even before Pollan. Darwin loved her and I think anybody who comes across her kind of falls for her, because she moves at our timescale. So in a way *Mimosa* is more animal-like, to us, than any other plant, simply because its movements are visible to us.

You can see that this plant closes its leaves if there is a perceived threat, so the question we posed was: can it learn not to close its leaves if there is a false alarm?

The thing is that every time it closes its leaves, its ability to photosynthesise is inhibited. There is a trade-off between defence and growth. From the plant's perspective it goes something like, "Am I going to protect myself or am I going to have dinner?" And of course if the threat is real, well, stuff dinner for now, I'd better protect myself! Right? But if the threat is not real, then it is not using the light to photosynthesise, so it's a wasted opportunity, which will slow down growth and so on. So there is this trade-off between leaves staying open and leaves closing. The experiment was testing one of the simplest forms of learning, which is known as habituation. The habituation system is very simple. We all do it—everywhere we look there is habituation. Basically if you are exposed to something repeatedly, you will pay attention to that at the beginning, because you need to work out what it is, but after a few times, you learn that there is nothing to worry about. So after some repeated exposure to a new stimulus, it will fade off from your perceptual world. With the *Mimosa* experiment, we were wondering what would happen if the plant was exposed to a stimulus that was scary but not life-threatening. So the plant would close the leaves and then after repeated exposure, would it be like, "It was scary and it's kind of annoying maybe, but there is no danger." If the plant can do that then you would expect the plant to keep the leaves open, because why would you react and be all freaked out by something when there is no actual threat? What we found was exactly that. Not only is the plant capable of ignoring a disturbance that has proven to have no immediate repercussions to its wellbeing, but it remembers the experience for a long time—almost a month! Also if the plant is in a low light environment, where the distinction between staying open or closing holds more significance to its survival, those plants learned faster. So when there was low light they were more responsive and they remembered the experience for a longer time. So the *Mimosa* experiment is important because it showed that plants can learn, and they remember. Also that they remember for differing lengths of time in a behavioural context.

Another of your experiments was based on the famous Pavlov's dog experiment. This experiment allowed you to scientifically demonstrate that plants are thinking and in fact imagining. What might be some of the implications of that knowledge as it makes its way into the collective consciousness?

The Pavlov's Pea experiment was testing for associative learning. As part of the learning process, generally, you need to perceive what is happening in this moment, then you need to store that information somewhere so that maybe

you can retrieve it in the next moment when that thing reappears. Then you can recognise it because you've already experienced it, and you know what it means. In the famous Pavlovian dog experiment, dinner is always presented after a bell is rung. If the dog learns this association between the bell ringing and predicting the arrival of dinner, then he will expect dinner to follow the bell and will start to salivate even if dinner is nowhere to be found. In my case, I had a fan blowing gently on the pea plants as the precursor to dinner, which for the peas was blue light. And my pea plants were able to anticipate the imminent arrival of dinner by following the position of the fan alone. Anticipating what's coming next requires either the dog or the plant or ourselves, whoever the subject is, to basically stretch cognition beyond the actual environment where the physical object, in this case dinner, light, doesn't actually exist yet. So the only way to bridge that gap is through your imagination. You are literally imagining dinner arriving. Then if dinner arrives, it's like, "Oh! Great. I knew it!" And if dinner doesn't arrive, then something else might happen and you learn something different—for example, dinner doesn't always come after this bell or this fan, and then there is a new learning opportunity. So those gaps between what you're expecting to happen and what is actually happening are important—imagination plays a crucial role in stretching us over and across. Of course we think imagination belongs to the mind, whatever the mind is. So if a pea plant or a dog is stretching itself and thinking about dinner arriving, then they have a mind, and they think about things. This is disturbing only if we are constraining the mind inside this skull. And it's disturbing only if you think that the mind can work because of the brain and therefore if there is no brain there is no mind, and if you don't have a brain you can't do these things. But whether we like it or not—whatever story we subscribe to—the fact remains that the dog does learn, and the plant does learn.

And you describe in your book how, remarkably, the precise design for the setup for this experiment was given to you by an encounter with a plant. Can you talk about that experience?

Yeah, so the design for the Pavlov's Pea experiment was given to me by a plant called Ayahuma which is also known as the Cannonball tree. If anybody does a quick search on this tree you will understand why it has this name. So I was in Peru and I was there working with a

curandero. And I was working with this plant as part of a dieta, which is a restrictive process where you are secluded in a space with no contact of any kind with the world outside. This includes having a very restricted diet, where you avoid a lot of foods. You are pretty much eating the most boring diet that you could ever imagine of boiled cabbage and some rice and if you do eat eggs, maybe you get an egg. During that process the design for this experiment came about. The year before I had tried to do that kind of experiment—to ask the question, *Can plants learn by association, the same way as the Pavlov Dog?* But the experiment just didn't work out. I was trying to do it with sunflower seedlings and the design looked like it should have worked. There was nothing technically that meant it shouldn't have worked but the experiment simply wasn't happening. So I had given up. Then a year later I find myself in Peru and I am working with Ayahuma, and one day while writing in my travel diary I realise I am writing as if someone is dictating to me, and immediately I know it's the plant. It's not only dictating instructions but also I'm drawing the exact setup and how big the pipes are and how to build it and how to design it. I still have it in my travel diary. The entire drawing

and description and details of what I need to do. So of course when I came back home to Australia and went back to work, I tried to set it up and for two weeks we were testing to find that it wasn't working. So there was that one moment where I was thinking, *Oh I'm a fool. I was thinking that a plant from the other side of the world was going to give me the instructions to run an experiment? Maybe you are mad, maybe you really have lost it?* So there was that moment of doubt. And in fact the following weekend I was ready to go in and dismantle everything. The experiment was running in the dark, in a relatively cold room because peas like lower temperatures. So I'm entering this room, I'm in the dark, I'm shivering a bit. The only lights available are the little blue lights that are part of the experiment. So I'm about to switch on the main light of the room and call it quits. Then something—and I don't really know what it was—something stopped me and it was like, *Just have one more look.* So I peered into the little mazes and suddenly I saw something that was always there, right in front of me but I had just been unable to see it. In that moment it became so obvious and clear. Not only were the peas doing what I was hoping they might be able to do—they were actually following the maze and learning—but they had been doing it for the entire time. It's just that I couldn't see! So at that moment I felt a lot of joy because I could see it was actually working and I thought, *If this is really showing what I think it is, it's going to be amazing.* And that was followed by months and months of hard work and data collection. But if I had turned those lights on, there would have been no Pavlovian Pea story to tell. And the most interesting thing at the personal level—what I'd really learned in that moment of hesitation—was that not only did I understand the experiment was working, I also understood why I needed to have that experience. Over the years, I had experienced so much resistance from colleagues about the work that I was doing with plants in terms of learning and cognition. Why was it stirring so much fear? They could literally not see the same world that I was given a preview of. I often felt under attack and on the defensive, especially with my *Mimosa* study, which took so much time and effort to get published. But in that moment in the dark cold room with my peas, I understood them. I was right in that same place myself just moments before. One moment I could not see something that was right in front of my nose, then there was just a slight change in awareness and suddenly it became crystal clear! The next question was: can I find the compassion for some of these colleagues who obviously felt very threatened by me describing a world that they couldn't see, and therefore didn't exist for them. That moment for me was huge and I remind myself of this whenever I'm doing my science but also in general: Can you remember that there are things that you still can't see but others might? And

can you remind yourself that the fact that you can't see something doesn't mean that it's not there?

Can you be open? Can you open yourself up to see what is in plain sight? Or at least to approach the experience? So I think that it really taught me how to be more porous and more open to experiencing the moments that arrive. So yeah, all the way from Peru. Ayahuma was a very big tree and a very big teacher!

You're now developing your biggest project yet: *Resonant Earth—Planetary Regeneration Through Sonic Midwifery*. The name is very intriguing. I know that the project is still in early development but is it too soon for you to talk about it?

No, not at all. I think it's time to talk about it! The vision for this project came to me with the help of a plant too, actually. Again this was the cacao. As I mentioned, I have developed a deep relationship with this plant and last year it guided me to Mexico where I ended up doing



quite an extended solo retreat into darkness. Within that space I was given a beautiful vision of what to do next. I say beautiful because I saw the entire project unfolding all the way to the end. So I know that it's going to work and now it's just a matter of implementing, which makes it really easy for me. The project is quite simple and it's the only thing, in my eyes, that really matters right now. I have an amazing team and we are beginning to roll it out on a planetary scale. The unique thing about *Resonant Earth* is the use of sound as a tool in the process of regenerating the entire planet from forests to coral reefs. It's exciting because it's going to grow from the grassroots and it's going to include—and need—everyone. We are currently birthing the website which will be launched soon, and the next stage will be to find supporters who are blessed with a lot of resources to share. So all the philanthropists out there, please contact us! We need you! [Laughs]. But basically we are ready to go. It's the perfect timing given the movement that we can all feel towards major change. First of all we need to regenerate the planet, which means regenerate the human too, so that we can all keep living here. At the same time, we need to learn how to thrive in new ways. And this is some of what *Resonant Earth* will be seeking to unearth and re-plant. 🖋️



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Beyond the Veil

It's fascinating to observe the similarities in what mystics and mystic traditions have articulated throughout history. We've collated just some of them to give insight into the experience of mysticism and how it has shaped societies, consciousness and our relationship to the Universe since the beginning of time.



Mother Julian of Norwich

The woman known as “Mother Julian of Norwich” lived from around 1342 to 1416 and wrote the first known surviving book in the English language by a woman: *Revelations of Divine Love*. During a period of terrible health at age 30, where she was considered to be dying, Mother Julian had a series of 16 visions (or *shewings*) of God that ended up nurturing her for over 40 years. She recovered from her illness and lived as a hermit in a little dwelling affixed to the church of Saint Julian in Norwich, which had a viewing window so she could watch the masses. Locals would come to speak to her of their lives, troubles and needs. The *shewings* seemed to give Mother Julian a God's-eye view of the world. “God is nearer to us than our own soul,” she wrote. She saw that the world and all its promises and problems were a “little thing” compared to the vast reality of Love. It was Love that contained everything, and anything outside of Love was small and not to be magnified. She also wrote of God's Love as maternal: “He is our most magnificent Mother” and “Our true mother Jesus: he alone bears us into joy and endless life.” For Mother Julian, hell is empty, and while sin is the cause of all pain in the world, one is not to worry too much about it, for it is also a pathway to self knowledge, and ultimately, as she famously wrote, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, all manner of thing, shall be well.”

“In mysticism, that love of truth which we see as the beginning of all philosophy leaves the merely intellectual sphere, and takes on the assured aspect of a personal passion. Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools. Hence, whilst the Absolute of the metaphysicians remains a diagram—impersonal and unattainable—the Absolute of the mystics is lovable, attainable, alive.”

Everlyn Underhill



Sufi Whirling Dervishes

The Whirling Dervishes, as they're known in the West, or *mevlevi* in Turkish, are an order of Sufis (the esoteric branch of Islam) founded after the death of the famous Sufi and poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī in 1273. The word *dervish* literally translates to “sill of the door,” and points to those who sit at the door of enlightenment. Inspired by Rumi's habit of twirling in the streets when in a state of elation, the Whirling Dervishes dance in a whirling motion and typically wear camel wool or felt hats and cast off black outerwear to reveal long white gowns. As they spin, they repeat the *dhikr* (spoken prayer), “la illahah illa'llah,” meaning, “There is no god but God” and extend their right hand towards the sky (signifying a connection to God) and their left hand towards the Earth.

This twirling is said to bring practitioners into a state of ecstasy, where they experience full absorption in the present moment and oneness with God—two concepts



at the very heart of Sufism. Rumi wrote, “Wherever the lover touches the ground with his dancing feet, the water of life will spring out of the darkness.”

The expression of spiritual rapture through dance, which is called *sema*, occurs in some denominations of Sufism, but not all, and has been performed in houses named *sama'khanas* since the 9th Century.

Wayapa Wuurk

Wayapa Wuurk means “connect to the Earth” in the language of the Peek Whuurrung people of southwest Victoria. It is an ancient Earth mindfulness practice based on the Indigenous wisdom of living in harmony with the planet. Wayapa teaches what all our Ancestors once knew: that we belong to the environment, we are not separate from it, so we need to look after it in our daily actions for our own wellbeing and that of generations to come. By becoming attuned to this connection, and being in awe of all that Earth provides, we are propelled to take care of it.

Wayapa Practice

Wayapa is best practiced outdoors but can be done anywhere. If you're indoors, choose a place that is special to you. Sit comfortably, close your eyes and connect to your space. What do you smell? What do you hear? What do you see behind closed eyes? What vibrations do you feel?

Imagine what the space would have looked like 300 years ago. Imagine how your ancestors would have understood the seasons and cycles of Mother Earth to survive and thrive. Feel the energy of everything around you.

Through 14 elements, Wayapa tells the story of Earth mindfulness, beginning with the Creator of this beautiful planet. Sit in gratitude for what is provided every day to sustain life.

Be the sun.

Be the moon.

Be the land.

Be lightning.

Be rain.

Be the wind.

Be the tree.

Be the bird flying through clean air, the kangaroo hopping through nutrient-rich soil and the eel swimming in fresh water.

Walk in the footsteps of your ancestors. Be the hunter. Be the gatherer. Only take what you need. Look after everything that sustains you. Be the child nurtured by Mother Earth and her elements. Take a big breath of air. Take a big gulp of cool water. Feel gratitude for the food on your table. Now be the Creator of the world that you're going to leave for your children's children.

Be Wayapa.

The Seven Hermetic Principles

Hermeticism is a set of philosophical and spiritual beliefs dating back to the second and third centuries that focuses on the pursuit of Gnosis (knowledge of the transcendent arrived at through experiential and intuitive means). It is based primarily on the letters of Hermes Terismegistus, whose identity is understood in different ways: one, as a revered Egyptian sage and powerful alchemist believed to be a master of the physical, spiritual and mental planes; and two, as a humanised fusion of the Egyptian God Thoth and the Greek God Hermes, who were both deities of magic and writing in their cultures. Hermes is renowned for articulating seven universal principles which have been a catalyst for cultural revolutions throughout history. They are documented in the 1908 publication, *The Kybalion* as follows:

1. The Principle of Mentalism

The all is mind; the universe is mental.

2. The Principle of Correspondence

As Above, So Below; As Within, So Without;
As the Universe, So the Soul...

3. The Principle of Vibration

Nothing rests; Everything moves; Everything vibrates.

4. The Principle of Polarity

Everything is dual; everything has poles; everything has its pair of opposites; like and unlike are the same; opposites are identical in nature, but different in degree; extremes meet; all truths are but half-truths; all paradoxes may be reconciled.

5. The Principle of Rhythm

Everything flows, out and in; everything has its tides; all things rise and fall; the pendulum-swing manifests in everything; the measure of the swing to the right is the measure of the swing to the left; rhythm compensates.

6. The Principle of Cause and Effect

Every Cause has its Effect; every Effect has its Cause; everything happens according to Law; Chance is but a name for Law not recognised; there are many planes of causation, but nothing escapes the Law.

7. The Principle of Polarity

Gender is in everything; everything has its Masculine and Feminine Principles; Gender manifests on all planes.



The Flammarion Engraving

“The Flammarion Engraving” is a work by an unknown artist that has been widely used to depict the human quest for knowledge of the Universe. It was first published in 1888 in a work by astronomer and writer Camille Flammarion with the caption: “A seeker of the Middle Ages finds the place where the sky and the earth touch, and open the mysterious gateway which separates this world from the other.”

Kundalini Yoga

Kundalini is a Sanskrit word meaning “coiled one,” and in Ancient Hindu teachings refers to a divine feminine energy (*shakti*) that lies dormant at the base of the spine (the *muldahara chakra*). It is also referred to as the “serpent power,” because when it is awakened, it has the potential to uncoil like a snake and rise up through the chakras, ultimately enabling the individual to reach higher states of consciousness. Yogic practices in the Kundalini tradition serve to clear the pathways for this unfurling of energy to happen, and typically incorporate breathwork, physical postures, meditation and the chanting of mantras. Yogi Bhajan was a master of Kundalini yoga who brought his teachings to the West in the 1960s. He famously said, “If your presence doesn’t work, neither will your word.”

Sat Kriya Practice

A very simple yet powerful Kundalini exercise which Yogi Bhajan taught is Sat Kriya. It works to stimulate the Kundalini energy and channel it through the body, thus activating one’s creative potential.

- Sit on your heels with your knees together.
- Stretch your arms overhead with the elbows straight so the arms are hugging the sides of your head.
- Interlace all fingers except the index which point up straight. Cross the thumbs over one another.
- Keep the spine still and straight.
- Begin to chant the words “*sat naam*” which means “truth is my identity.”
- As you chant “sat,” pull the navel in and up towards the spine. As you chant “naam,” relax the navel.
- Continue in a steady rhythm, chanting “sat” with a navel pull, “naam” with the release.
- The entire body is still except for the gentle pumping of the navel centre.
- Keep your eyes closed and focused on the point between your brows. Continue chanting for anywhere between three and eleven minutes.
- To close the practice, inhale with the arms still pointing up, hold, and release the breath, slowly release the arms.



Rabia Basri

Rabia Basri lived in the 8th Century in what is now Iraq. She left no writings behind, but much of her life was documented by the poet Attar of Nishapur in the 12th Century. It’s said that Rabia’s family were slaughtered and she was captured and put into indentured service. One day, the captor saw her praying and was so overwhelmed by the singularity of her focus and the poetry that came from her that he became her follower. Rabia embraced the reality of Love as the way to approach God. She uses the word *ishq* to speak of this Love—a word filled with devotion, togetherness and sensuality.

The 8th Century in which Rabia lived is known as the Islamic Golden Age, when the great city of Baghdad was founded, and prosperity, learning and reward were plenty and accessible. While she did not condemn these realities, she pointed to a deeper one. She felt you should not do good because of rewards, but simply because it is good.

Rabia was sought out by both women and men for her wisdom, breaking the ideas that only women should seek insight from a woman religious. In this way she is a classic Sufi, for within that tradition all barriers and false delineations should be transcended. For Rabia, everything—reward, gender, power—fell short of the great goodness of being single-minded in pursuit of Love.

*If I worship You because of Fear of Hell
then burn me in Hell;
If I worship You because I desire Paradise,
then keep me from Paradise;
If I worship You for Yourself alone,
then do not exclude me from Your Beauty.*

—Rabia Basri



The Seven Sisters

The Seven Sisters is an Indigenous Dreamtime story shared by many clans in the Western and Central deserts of Australia. The story goes that seven Ancestral sisters are pursued by an evil shape-shifting spirit, a man called Wati Nyiru or Yurlu, and are driven across the land and into the night sky where they become the Napaljarri-warnu, the star cluster also known as the Pleiades.

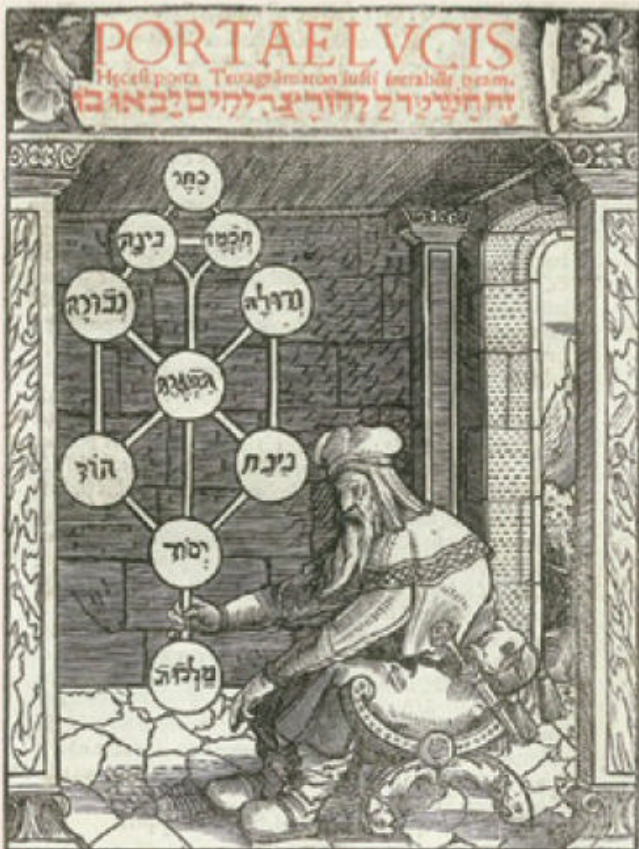


Alma Nungarrayi Granites
Yanjirpirri Jukurpa – Seven Sisters Dreaming
Jap 008434, acrylic on linen, 152 x 61 cm

Image courtesy of Japingka Aboriginal Art

Kabbalah

Kabbalah is a form of Jewish mysticism that originated in southern Europe around the end of the 12th Century, and then enjoyed renaissances in the 16th and early 19th centuries. The Hebrew word *kabbalah* translates to, “That which has been received.” For centuries, it was a tradition in which secret, special knowledge of the Divine was passed down through the rabbinic elite, although eventually it became widespread. In the 17th Century, Kabbalah was disparaged by Jewish leaders as the antithesis of reason and logic, and therefore Judaism. It is a complex and multi-faceted tradition, but its chief interest is in the connection between the Infinite (a Godhead referred to as Ein Sof) and the finite (our own mortal experience here on Earth). There is a magical component of Kabbalah that focuses on incantations, angels, amulets and alchemy, but ultimately Kabbalists seek to evolve the Self.



Guru Nanak

Guru Nanak—also known as Baba/Father Nanak—lived from 1469 to 1539. He was born in the Delhi Sultanate, what is now Pakistan, the son of an accountant father and merchant mother. Stories of his youth are filled with episodes of divine grace. At age seven, he astounded his teacher when he delivered a reflection on the symbolism of the first letter of the alphabet, saying that the essential unity of this letter is a way of understanding the essential unity at the heart of all beings. For Guru Nanak, oneness led to his understanding that a person should work honestly, without exploiting others, to provide for the needs of yourself, your family and community. This desire is fuelled by a practice of prayer, or inward looking. And from this also comes the great virtue of hospitality, the hallmark of the Sikh tradition that grew from him. In his thirties, Guru Nanak visited the “nine pilgrimage sites.” While these are unspecified, it’s imagined he went across the various Hindu and Muslim sites of Asia. In light of his openness and pilgrimage, Sikh Temples have, for centuries, offered a gracious extension of hospitality, food, welcome and shelter to any pilgrim, of any origin. For Guru Nanak, the question of “God” is entirely taken over by the question of practicing Love. To practice Love is to break down all barriers: between self and others; between self and God; between self and self. Love calls people into the holiest of experiences, and all language—of God, of doctrine—diminishes while what is most important increases. The Sikh scriptures, Guru Granth Sahib, contain many of the teachings and stories of Guru Nanak.

“The lotus has always had an important mystical meaning. Its roots are down in the slime and mud at the bottom of the lake and the flower unfolds on the surface of the water.”

Carl Jung



Yin and yang

Derived from Chinese philosophy and medicine as early as the 2nd Century BCE, and symbolised as the famous black-and-white paisley symbol (*taijitu*), yin and yang is the principle that there are two distinct but complementary and interdependent energies at force in the universe and within humans. The qualities of these two energies can only be understood in relation to each other: yang is associated with the daytime and is brighter, harder, faster, warmer and more logical, masculine, active and dynamic, while yin is associated with the nighttime and is darker, softer, slower, cooler and more intuitive, feminine, passive and static. Sometimes yang is described as the bright side of the mountain, and yin the shadowy side. The idea is that we achieve harmony by finding a middle path between the two (this middle path is known as Tao, or “the way”).



“In mythos and fairy tales, deities and other great spirits test the hearts of humans by showing up in various forms that disguise their divinity. They show up in robes, rags, silver sashes, or with muddy feet. They show up with skin dark as old wood, or in scales made of rose petal, as a frail child, as a lime-yellow old woman, as a man who cannot speak, or as an animal who can. The great powers are testing to see if humans have yet learned to recognise the greatness of soul in all its varying forms.”

Clarissa Pinkola Estes

The Maiden of Ludmir

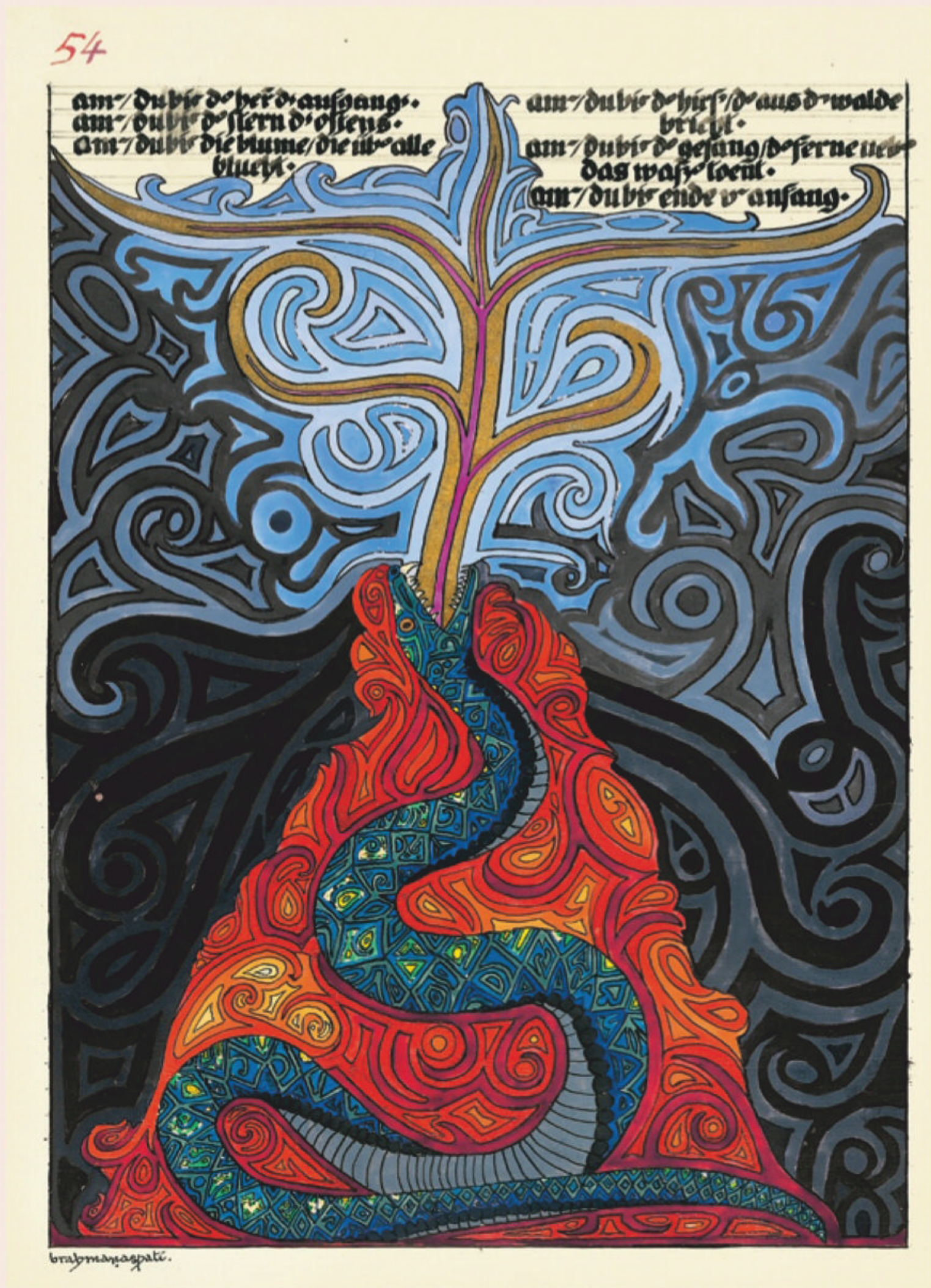
Hannah Rochel Verbermacher—also known as The Maiden of Ludmir—is part of the Hasidic Movement of Judaism, which began in western Ukraine in the 18th Century and spread across Europe and beyond. The word *hassid* means “piety,” and adherents of this movement focused on devotion in prayer, the unity of all things and the importance of simplicity—ultimately, kindling a joy in life as it is now.

The Maiden of Ludmir was the only woman in Hasidim to function as a Rabbi in her own right. While many Hasidic leaders were from great dynasties, she was not. She also chose not to marry. When she inherited family money, she built a house with a study and led weekly sessions for her followers, looking at religious texts and recounting stories of great sages. Many who attended were very poor. She lived through the 1800s and emigrated to Jerusalem in the late 1850s where she continued her reputation as a woman of devotion, attracting followers from different religions to her sessions. It’s said that she drew on male and female influences and had a more androgynous identity.



The Maiden’s mysticism was simple, but her practice was both public and political: by uniting people from across religious, economic and gender divides, she was embodying the ancient hope of Judaism—*Tikkun Olam*—to heal the world of its divides through collaboration, community building and shared social responsibilities.

The art of Carl Jung



"Snake Erupting" by Carl Jung, from *The Red Book*

Buddha nature

At the heart of Buddhism is what is known as the Triple Gem, or the three jewels (*triratna* in Sanskrit): “I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the dharma. I take refuge in sangha.” The first gem, the Buddha, refers not just to following the example of the Buddha but also to uncovering one’s own Buddha nature (*tathagatha-garbha*—literally “womb of the Buddhas”). Rather than being held up as a god, the Buddha—who was born Siddhārtha Gautama and lived around the 6th Century BC—is considered an enlightened man who existed to show the rest of us our true potential: our own enlightened nature. Buddhist practices are largely concerned with removing the layers of conditioning to reveal the part of us that is already awakened. Practitioners gain insight (*vipassana*) into their conditioning and the workings of their mind through meditation—particularly through awareness of the three poisons (attachment, aversion and ignorance) and the five hindrances (sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt).

A meditation on Buddha nature

- Find a comfortable seat, supported by cushions if needed.
- Close down the eyes if comfortable. Soften the shoulders and face, and lengthen the spine.
- Become aware of your breath as it journeys through your body.
- Notice the natural pauses at the top of your inhales and the bottom of your exhales.



- Shift your awareness to the activity of your mind. Begin to observe your thoughts without trying to change them.
- You might notice that there is a part of you that is thinking and a part of you that is watching the thinking. You might also notice that there are tiny gaps between where one thought ends and another begins.
- Allow yourself to rest in this spaciousness.

“The ‘burning bush’ was not a miracle. It was a test. God wanted to find out whether or not Moses could pay attention to something for more than a few minutes. When Moses did, God spoke. The trick is to pay attention to what is going on around you long enough to behold the miracle without falling asleep. There is another world, right here within this one, whenever we pay attention.”

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner

Shamanism

Shamanism is most likely the oldest mystic tradition on the planet, with different expressions found in Indigenous tribes and cultures dating back over 40,000 years ago. It’s essentially a healing tradition, based on the deep understanding that humans are of the earth, and that our greatest source of renewal and transcendence comes from connecting with creation. Shamanistic practices include ceremony, dance, music, meditation, fasting, sweat lodges and entheogens, and serve to place the practitioner in an experience of complete interdependence. They are typically led by a shaman, someone who has altered their consciousness to obtain knowledge from the spirit world and help bring healing to their community.

The poetry of Rumi

Perhaps the most influential mystic of all time, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, better known as Rumi, articulated his insights of the Divine most powerfully through poetry. Born in present-day Tajikistan in the 13th Century, he wrote often of a “religion of love” that crosses denominational boundaries.

What Was Told, That

What was said to the rose that made it open was said
to me here in my chest.
What was told the cypress that made it strong
and straight, what was
whispered the jasmine so it is what it is, whatever made
sugarcane sweet, whatever
was said to the inhabitants of the town of Chigil in
Turkestan that makes them
so handsome, whatever lets the pomegranate flower blush
like a human face, that is
being said to me now. I blush. Whatever put eloquence in
language, that’s happening here.
The great warehouse doors open; I fill with gratitude,
chewing a piece of sugarcane,
in love with the one to whom every *that* belongs!

The Gift of Lovers

If a spiritual explanation alone were sufficient,
the creation of the world
would have been vain and pointless.
If love were only spiritual,
the practices of fasting and worship would not exist.
The gifts of lovers to one another are,
in respect to love, nothing but forms;
yet, they testify
to an invisible love.



Meister Eckhart

Eckhart von Hochheim was born in what is now Germany in about 1260 and lived until he was almost 70. While he became a priest in the Dominican Catholic order, his writings went far beyond the borders of Christianity. Eckhart was focused on the presence of “God” in the soul of the person. For him, the experience of God has similarities to the state of Nothingness in Buddhism. “God becomes, and God unbecomes,” he teased. The centre of all things is at once powerful and porous. To go into prayer, for Eckhart, is to become prayer, to become the meeting place of the experience of Oneness. “The eye with which I see God is the eye with which God sees me,” he wrote. “My eye and God’s eye is one eye, and one sight, and one knowledge, and one Love.” Eckhart believed that hell was our incapacity to let things go, and so for him, all life was a process of letting things go—into the deepest space of trust. This way of abandoning, of negating all that we think we are, is sometimes called “nirvana” or the “via negativa”. It’s about an attitude, a poise, a posture with which to hold a life, knowing that the truest vocation is to the deepest part of the self, the place of pure communion. Everything else—possessions, demands, jealousies, achievements—are things to give up along the way, because nothing else will do but to arrive at Nothing with Nothing. There, Eckhart believed, we meet the deepest, truest and purest Love.

Tantra

Tantra—an esoteric tradition born in India in the first millennium and found in Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism—is concerned with energy and desire as means of harnessing greater energy and ultimately achieving liberation. Most associate it with sexual techniques, but that’s only one piece of a large puzzle. Where mainstream Buddhism regards desire as an obstacle that contributes to suffering, Tantra is about celebrating earthly pleasures, and views desire as energetically charged—not in a hedonistic sense, but in the interest of attaining spiritual freedom. Tantric practices are designed to put practitioners in touch with the energy or enlightened consciousness that runs like a current through all living things, including ourselves. From a Tantric perspective, humans can attain liberation through embodiment and experiences in the physical world.

Rudolf Steiner's Six Basic Exercises

Rudolf Steiner was an Austrian mystic from the late 19th Century, renowned for his revolutionary thinking across a range of disciplines, including agriculture, education and economics. He wrote numerous meditations for developing one's connection to higher worlds, and penned these six supplementary exercises to synthesise the rational and spiritual components of cognition in everyday life.

1. Control of thought

The first practice is about gaining control over what you think. Take a simple, human-made object like a pen or glass and spend five minutes focusing on it. Describe the object to yourself, notice its shape, colour, weight, smell and so on. Think about how this object was made, where the materials came from. If your mind wanders, gently bring your focus back to the object.

2. Control of will

The next is for gaining control over what you do. Choose a simple action to perform each day at a particular time. It should be something you wouldn't ordinarily do; it can even be a little odd. For example, draw a circle on the door with your left index finger five times. Make it a duty to perform this action at that time each day. As you progress, additional tasks can be added at other times.

3. Equanimity

This is about building awareness of your emotional response to the world and calming extreme feelings. When something happens that invokes a particular reaction from you, the work is to observe that response, feel it in its entirety and neutralise it internally with an opposing emotion.

4. Positivity

Thinking and feeling are combined here to develop a positive attitude to the world. It requires paying attention to someone or something around you in a given moment and seeing the good, praiseworthy and beautiful in it.



5. Open-mindedness

Next is for becoming more open to situations and ideas, and never letting expectations based on the past close your mind to the lessons of the moment. It involves being in a state of curiosity and wonder at even the most mundane of things, like a leaf falling from a tree, and keeping open the possibility of something unexpected happening in a given situation.

6. Harmony

The final exercise is to make a harmonious whole of thought, feeling and action. It involves finding a balanced relationship between the five exercises, practicing each one regularly and in different combinations with one another, thus being able to move between them more dynamically.

“If we do not believe within ourselves this deeply rooted feeling that there is something higher than ourselves, we shall never find the strength to evolve into something higher.”

Rudolf Steiner

Hilma af Klint

Words: Cherise Lily Nana



Just over 30 years ago, the art of Hilma af Klint was unveiled to the world in an exhibition titled, *The Spiritual in Art* in Los Angeles. Though Hilma produced a monumental amount of work in her lifetime, her abstract paintings never left the doors of her studio, for in her will she requested that her art remain hidden until at least 20 years after her death in 1944. As her work now finds its way into the public eye—most recently in a solo show, *Paintings for the Future*, at the Guggenheim Museum—the world has become mesmerised by this Swedish mystic artist. Who was she? What message was she trying to deliver? And why did she not want us to hear it until now?

On October 26, 1862, Hilma was born into a lineage of explorers, a family of naval officers and maritime cartographers in Stockholm. From an early age, she carried on the spirit of journeying and mapping distant worlds, devoting her days to diving into the mysteries of the sacred. Hilma believed that, “Life is a farce if a person does not serve truth.” While she kept company with close female friends and various esoteric communities, she never married nor birthed a family, she was so deeply committed to her divine union with the unseen realms.

In 1879, at age 17, Hilma became interested in the Spiritualist movement and began participating in séances. One year later her sister Hermina died of the flu at age 10, making her more and more curious about what lies beyond the veil. Whatever Hilma found when she peered into numinous spaces kept her captivated until her last breath.

While many mystics have expressed the rapturous experience of divine encounters, the capacity to document such magic lies in yoking the spirit realm with the material world, something Hilma achieved to mesmerising effect in her artmaking practice. In 1882, Hilma went on to study at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm, one of few places in Europe that permitted women to enrol in their programs at the time. It was here that she learned the foundations in landscape and portraiture painting. Her propensity for endlessly dissecting the world around her lent itself to botanical painting, and these pieces were the only works she would share publicly in small groups and scientific journals. Abstraction entranced her imagination, though, and despite being classically trained, it would be her esoteric studies and direct instruction from the spirits that would inform the greater part of her life’s work.

Hilma’s journals record encounters with otherworldly beings during séances with a group of four women she met in the Edelweiss society. They called themselves “The Five” and would gather to sit in prayer, meditation and Christian scripture before invoking spiritual leaders that they referred to as the “High Ones.” The women would then transcribe what they heard and document their findings, filling pages of sketchbooks with intuitive drawings, some of which became the basis for the spiralled compositions in Hilma’s chaos series. Over the years it became clear that Hilma had a gift as a psychic medium and was committed to creating visual translations of esoteric knowledge. “All knowledge,” as one of the spirits, Gregor, transmitted, “that is not of the senses, not of the intellect, not of the heart but is the property that exclusively belongs to the deepest aspect of your being [...] the knowledge of your spirit.”



“Group IV, The Ten Largest, No. 3, Youth,” from 1907



“Group X, No. 1, Altarpiece,” from 1915

In 1905, another of these supernatural guides named Amaliel commissioned her to make a body of work titled, *The Paintings for the Temple*. This inspired series saw Hilma initially create 111 paintings over the course of one and a half years, her petite five-foot frame becoming almost larger than life as these grand works danced out through her frenzied paintbrush. In her notebook, she explains her process while producing these paintings: “The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings, and with great force. I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict. Nevertheless, I worked swiftly and surely, without changing a single brush stroke.” Hilma also referenced the great responsibility that came with this heavenly commission: “This was the large work, that I was to perform in my life.” Before commencing the enormity of the task, she spent a year preparing by mentally and physically cleansing her body and mind. Receiving direction from Amaliel, she was instructed to undertake a retreat in isolation, eat a simple vegetarian diet, and focus her mind. This further enabled her to become a clear conduit for the work to pour through.

This dedication to the translation of mystical experience and esoteric knowledge is what sets Hilma’s work apart from her fellow abstract painters of the modernist era. Hilma was less interested in dissolving the aesthetic norms of art, and more engaged in trying to convey

visually encoded messages from beyond. Instead of looking to her peers or the Western art history canon for inspiration, or relying on her physical senses to describe her world, Hilma’s muses were intangible in nature. She had committed to tuning her inner senses, painting the mysterious murmurings that she heard from the universe. While a mystical experience is inherently ineffable, the symbolism encrypted in Hilma’s art mirrors this and provides an evocative threshold for the viewer to experience their own intimate moment of unity with the divine. Her work invites us to lean into the great mystery and, as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke would say, to “try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue.”

Hilma’s quest led her to join various spiritualist movements of the times, but it was her involvement with the Theosophical Society that would have the greatest impact on her art. In 1908, after completing the first portion of her *Paintings for the Temple* series, Hilma sought the advice of Rudolph Steiner, then head of the Theosophical Society (before later branching off to form his own philosophy and educational curriculum in Anthroposophy). Believing that Steiner might be able to assist her in interpreting the message in her works, she presented her series, only to hear that he too was unable to decode their meaning. He advised her to keep her work hidden from the public for another 50 years. The news prompted Hilma—who was already a perfectionist and had grown exhausted by the transcendent output of painting—to temporarily abandon the project for the next four years, resuming her botanical painting and looking after her ill mother.

Rudolph Steiner’s feedback didn’t dampen Hilma’s innate fortitude though, she went on to be prolific, producing over 1000 pieces in her career. In a sense, Steiner was merely reflecting back to her what the “High Ones” had already intimated in their orders to keep the work hidden; the world was not quite ready for her. In this current age where we are enamoured by success and selfies, perhaps what seems so inconceivable is the notion that ultimately, it wasn’t about her at all. Hilma was prepared to relinquish any accolades or fortune during her lifetime, instead ensuring that the work would be received in an era when it would have the greatest impact. In her séance notes, she had scribed to the spirits, “Teach me to listen and receive in humility the glorious message.” This sublime reminder to tune in—amidst the whirring white noise of a world that spins ever so quickly—might just be her greatest legacy.

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JOSEPH R. LEE ANALYSES DREAMS

I discovered Joseph Lee through the podcast “This Jungian Life,” in which he and two friends, all of them therapists, come together to discuss a topic through a Jungian lens. Every week I’ll listen in to a conversation about sibling complexes or procrastination or chronic lateness, and be riveted by the collective wisdom and banter that unfolds. Joseph, Deb and Lisa share personal anecdotes and weave in mythology, archetypes and fascinating insights on Jung to unpack the topic and illuminate the workings of the subconscious. They finish each episode with an analysis of a dream that’s been submitted by a listener. It’s scintillating, and—because of the intimate connection between the three friends—delightful and hilarious too.

Joseph is a clinical social worker and Jungian analyst working in private practice with adults and teens in Virginia Beach. A fateful meeting of mystics as a high school acting student sparked his curiosity and entry into the world of chakras, cosmologies and energies, ultimately leading him to the Hermetic Kabbalah tradition which he has been connected to for the past 40 years, and has profoundly shaped his personal and working life.

As a Jungian analyst, Joseph pays attention to the symbolic language and archetypal imagery of one’s inner and outer experience, helping to facilitate what Jung called the “Individual Process,” which is one’s natural movement towards wholeness. Our conversation took place on the eve of the new year and was for me a mystical experience in itself—mostly because of the way Joseph invited me to connect with him through our monitors, arriving at a place where the notes I’d prepared were merely obstructions to a much deeper, more soulful enquiry of what it means to experience the world in a mystical way. I was taken by both his brilliant mind (he’s a living encyclopaedia on Jung alone) and his wisdom on the human condition, which seems to come from his own rigorous self-work, as well as an open, desirous spirit that lets the particulars of the world—the nectar of it—in.

SUBJECT

Joseph R. Lee

OCCUPATION

Jungian analyst

INTERVIEWER

Nathan Sclaro

PHOTOGRAPHER

Eamon Queeney

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NATHAN SCOLARO: I should preface this by saying I have little knowledge on Jung or mysticism, I'm approaching all of this very much as a novice who's eager to learn.

JOSEPH R. LEE: Well, what I find is if you're deeply connected to yourself and I'm connected to myself then our speaking back and forth will allow what's significant to emerge. The fact that mysticism and Jungian work is new to you is perfect because the questions that occur to you are likely to occur to everyone.

But right now, I'm going to take a moment to find you. [Silently gazing]. OK. Now, close your eyes. I just want you to think about the word mysticism without having to force it to mean anything. [Long pause]. Ask your soul to bring forward an image in response to the word and describe that for me.

So the first thing I saw was the colour of the sky, it's coming into nighttime, blazes of orange and pink and dark blue. And we're in a bush, in Australian bushland. There are trees and shrubs. It's quite dense. And there is aliveness in the stillness of this scene. Everything is alive here at the turn of the day.

When you said that we're in the bushland, do you get a sense that anyone is with you?

No, I'm on my own. Is this an area that you're familiar with?

Yeah, it resembles the bushland behind my childhood home where I grew up playing. It's like I'm there as my adult-self knowing that my child-self was much more connected to the magic of this place. My child-self was aware of all the connectivity happening. And so there is a longing for me to return to that place in myself, not necessarily the physical place.

Sit in the longing to return and allow it to be precious. Allow it to fill your chest, your whole body, your emotions. That feeling is mysticism. Mysticism at its core is the longing to return. So much of Rumi's poetry expresses the longing to return to the Beloved. Hindu mysticism is about longing to return to a primal unity.

Central to all mysticism is a sense of where you are as well as a memory of where you belong or once belonged, and an aching sense of the distance between those two points.

The question is, once that longing wakes up in you, which path will you choose to traverse the distance? And that's where methodology comes in.

Methodology?

Yes. Any valid path provides a sequence of what I would call "spiritual technologies." So let's say you decide to learn Transcendental Meditation. Their technology is to give you a Vedic mantra which you repeat in your mind for 20 minutes twice a day. That, over time, is believed to calibrate something in the soul and body which allows one to progressively approach the creative space between spirit and matter. Vipassana meditation teaches you a process of scanning your body and pausing whenever a thought, feeling, emotion or sensation rises. You meet what's noticed with a handful of ideas. If it's a thought you say, "Hello, How long are you going to stay here?" If it's an emotion you might remind yourself that everything emerges, everything sustains and everything dissolves. That's a methodology. It's very important to understand that each method effects who you will be when you arrive at the place you're longing for. On some level we all know that. Let's say you had five friends in college who were determined to be editors and you all met 10 years in the future. The person who decided to hike the Himalayas for five years and create a documentary to hone their skills would land in their profession as a completely different

editor to the one who immediately went to a publishing house and wore a little visor while dutifully doing editorial work and completing assignments.

So we need to be conscious of the methodology or the path of return that we choose? Or does the path naturally unfold for us?

That's a great question actually. I'm going to sit with that for a moment. [Silence].

I'm thinking of stories that students and

colleagues have shared. Some did come to a juncture in life and synchronistically a path of return was offered. They were unsure of who they were or what their next step was, and then a friend out of the blue called and said, "Come to this lecture" and a whole possibility opened up. Even so, most paths begin just as we did with the discovery of the longing to return. Then when that longing reaches a certain fever, it mobilises people to start actively seeking a way of return, to start knocking at the door. Now in modern times people usually start their door knocking via Google and experience a flood of information about numerous paths. People will first respond to that fever by dining at the great buffet of spiritual options. Some will spend years just attending retreats, "I signed up for this tour to walk the labyrinths of 57 churches in Europe and it's going to transform me!" Then they come back and look for another retreat, and then they're going to Bali where a Shaman is going to initiate them into a relationship with a sacred tree, so they'll do that for a week, and on and on. Some people spend their whole lives only sampling a bit of this or that. What they don't realise is that a path of any true merit would never offer its full secrets to somebody who's only willing to hang around for 48 hours sampling it. So returning to your personal experience, you felt a longing to return to a childhood connection to nature.

A connection to something that was much greater than myself. But then you know I also went through a Catholic conditioning, and that something greater suddenly was personified and seen and knowable. Cerebrally I could understand what that greater thing was and so the mystery suddenly was gone. I suspect that the mystery is a big part of the mystical experience; that we have to have something mysterious there for us, leading us, calling us.

Right! So what I want to speak to is that connection, and that connection is what I would call spirituality. So I'll ask a student in the midst of a meditation or a process that I'm leading them through to evaluate their spirituality on a spectrum of connectedness. How connected are you to your body, your mind, your emotions? How connected are you to anything that's larger than you? If somebody says, "I don't feel connected to anything including myself," then I know their spiritual sensibility is not functioning at the moment. That's why sometimes people out of desperation turn to substances like ayahuasca, which temporarily throw open

the organ that allows them to feel profoundly connected and can be deeply inspiring in the moment. Such experiences may eventually set people towards the path when they realise they can't be constantly tripping on ayahuasca as a practice. Now I myself am a Hermetic Kabbalist and a Jungian analyst. Those are my areas of interest and exploration for helping people get to the place they're longing to return to. I discovered my path when I was 18 and I'm 57 now, so I stand in that spiritual world with a deeply lived experience. Becoming a Jungian as a discipline was added later in my adult years.

And can you help me to understand the Hermetic Kabbalistic work?

Sure. There were many Rabbinical Kabbalistic schools over time,

some in Israel then across Spain and Eastern Europe. Each had its own orientation yet all primarily used Jewish metaphors and Torah references to explain and amplify the principles. The student was constantly in a tight orbit around Jewish culture and Talmudic philosophy. That's where the symbols, metaphors and idioms would come from in order to amplify their mystical system. An amazing thing happened when Alexander the Great



conquered the ancient world: horrific but amazing in that it blew apart the boundaries between nations and cultures, allowing a movement of ideas that was unprecedented in the ancient world. At its height the libraries of Alexandria were a place where philosophers, scholars, mystics and spiritual teachers could all come to record their wisdom and share information. This had never happened before—it fostered an enormous Hellenistic process. Kabbalists were collaborating with mystics from India, Persia and Greece. Egyptian magic was being recorded and studied. As this enormous scholastic melting pot began to boil, new Hellenistic mystery traditions emerged. After numerous political and religious misfortunes, the libraries were burned to suppress knowledge of alternatives to the Roman version of Catholicism, assuring its place as the primary political religious machine. But adepts from these Hellenistic traditions escaped and relocated to other parts of the world. Around 1200AD a particular group of adepts established their location to Fes, Morocco, and out of that tradition a stream of Hermetic Kabbalah, which involved methodologies from many systems, began to be distributed. And I am educated in that tradition.

Incredible. And how did it come to be in your life?

So, I want to dig down a little deeper to tell that story, because I have my elevator speech and I'd like to be more authentic with you. [Silence]. I think the stage was set being raised in a very, very abusive home. This was back in the '60s when people refused to get in each other's business. As long as somebody didn't run into the street with blood pouring out of their bodies, the neighbours just closed their windows. So without external help as a young boy I had to develop a kind of interiority as a way of staying at least marginally intact. This is a skill many children develop when they're in terrible circumstances, they are forced to discover an inner refuge. That inner refuge if it's not understood correctly later in life can create a lot of problems or ideally become a portal to mysticism. But I survived by this connection to an inner world through my childhood into high school. And I was an odd kid, not terribly social. But right about when I was 16, this tremendous fortuitous thing happened. I decided that I would get interested in theatre. That was a wonderful safe way to finally learn how to be expressive. The school system in New York, which had a lot of money in the '70s, hired a professional troupe of actors to come to our high school and create a program. What they didn't know is that these actors were all living together in a spiritual commune developing their own mystical work. So

as they're teaching us about acting, they're talking about chakras and astrology and blending energies with each other and all the New Age stuff that was going to blossom in the collective a few years down the road.

Wow. Incredible.

So I became a bit literate in all of this. The first time they talked about chakras, it captured my attention, and I went looking for an occult book store in Long Island in 1977, and happened to find one in a neighbouring village and walked in. I tried to describe this thing they had taught me [laughs]. I could barely pronounce it and this big stocky guy behind the counter said, "Oh, chakras! Yeah!" And he sold me a book. Then we started talking and hit it off. I would come as often as I could after school and spend hours talking with him as I'd sweep the shop and help him close up. I developed a kind of Mr. Miyagi relationship with him.

Brilliant!

He'd say, "I think you should try this book. What do you think of that?" At this time I was still working with the mystical acting group and I found out that my high school English teacher was a Rosicrucian who's teaching astrology lessons so I started to attend those too. You know, this is the '70s, all of this stuff's going on under the scene and I'm putting my hands in it. Then the fellow at the bookstore starts moving me towards Western esotericism. Once I read the word "Kabbalah" I had an overwhelming feeling of recognition and a compelling need to know what it meant. So, he began to feed me different kinds of literature. Eventually he said, "check out this organisation." And this organisation was part of that Hermetic tradition. I've been connected to that and subsequently similar organisations for about 40 years. So over those 40 years I would say the first 20 were really just for my healing. It was about integrating a cosmology, which for me was The Tree of Life, as a way of experiencing my relationship to the order of the universe, and that finally brought order to my inner world. Human beings have a natural curiosity for cosmology. That's why things like astrology are endlessly fascinating to people. Even if we don't go into it seriously, just the feeling that the planets could have such an intimate relationship to us is exciting.

There is a deep spiritual thirst for experiencing a connection to a larger reality; that we are not hurtling like nihilistic specs of dust through a mechanical universe.

We need to feel that there is an orderly macrocosm or outer universe, and an orderly microcosm or an internal universe, and that those two things are connected. In the ancient traditions they developed philosophies, exercises, ritual ceremonies and meditations as a way of building an imaginal model of the cosmos, and at least in the beginning, a theoretical relationship between you and that larger thing which would eventually lead to an actual experience of it. This happened experimentally in shamanic traditions thousands of years ago. A shaman might demonstrate a natural interiority, most likely developed by surviving a life-threatening injury. Having come back from the dead, he was marked by the spirit world and recognised in the community as being special. As the shaman mapped out his interiority he would report it to the tribe. He might say, "The mountain is alive because when I go within and look at it there is this thrumming towering woman who knocks me to my knees, and she's singing this song and I'm going to teach you this song!" So when the tribe couldn't connect to the mountain themselves they sang the song, and this thrill would happen in their souls. That's the instinctive building of a cosmology which demonstrates that you're alive over here, the mountain is alive over there, and your ritual singing puts you in relationship to it.

Wild. So you had this building of your own cosmology in the first 20 years of your life. I mean, that on its own seems extraordinarily unique, let alone then going to help others build that for themselves.

It was in one sense. I started with my own interiority, as many of my students have, but it was adding Hermetic Kabbalah that brought a full integration of our personalities. We all need a cosmology that is fully satisfactory to a modern adult mind so it must be as complicated as the modern mind itself.

Say it again.

Sure. Twenty thousand years ago humans had not yet developed great, complicated intellectual models of philosophy, religion, politics and natural science. But they accessed a great inner world of feeling, instinct and imagery, they had a natural mysticism, which we lack. For example in New Zealand one ancient cosmology says that in the beginning

the great mother and the great father were constantly in union and all their progeny were crushed into a suffocating space. One of the sons, Tane Mahuta, had enough power to pull his parents apart and keep them separate. In the space between the mother and the father the entire world was created. Tane became the primordial tree holding heaven, the father, and the earth, the mother, apart. If you go to New Zealand and talk to the Maori they may be willing to take you to the Tane tree in their forest. So out of this space rose all the different children of the primal parents. Their attributes are related to what's observed in the forest. God of storm, god of volcanoes, god of the ocean, these are the larger things that humans need to feel connected to. When they would enter their interiority and contemplate the churning power of the ocean, their souls would naturally create an image, which is called a symbol. That's how the individual is able to connect psychologically to the ocean. Systems of these symbols and how they interact internally become a cosmology. Human beings still have this capacity today, which brings us back to Jung, because Jung was fascinated by the symbol-making function of the human psyche. For instance, in the work you did by simply going inside in a relaxed way and holding the abstract idea of mysticism, your psyche independently placed you back in the bush with a feeling of longing. You did not choose that. That was gifted to you. So there is something indigenous to human beings that when we are between the inner and outer worlds, and we are focusing on a mystery, a part of the human soul will create an image which allows a deeper connection. Jung was fascinated by that.

I'm feeling an intense sadness while you're speaking and I'm wondering why, because I find that concept so wonderful and wild and profound and I want to be in that space doing that work of dreaming up symbols and having relationships to them all the time. And yet there is a deadening that our culture has done to that process, and I think that's where the sadness is coming from. That we either haven't been allowed to do that, or we've been told that it's not valid. But there is a deep part of me that knows what you're saying is the most exquisite, true expression of our aliveness.

Jung was heartened and I want you to be heartened.

Okay. Because even in the most oppressive materialistic lifeless ruthless cultures, people still sleep and dream. And when the ego has been pulled down into the unconscious, the symbol-making function in the psyche is set free. It communicates to every human being every night in multiple symbolic themes. Even if people forget it, because many people will repress their dreams, they still had the experience. And many people will remember a dream even if just fleetingly, "I dreamt I was flying and the sun talked to me!" That's a symbol and that symbol connects their waking mind to a deeper reality even if they don't know what to call it. The reason human beings do that is because they cannot survive without it. So what I'd love to hearten you with is that even though people's egos can walk around saying, "Everything's about money and sex and power!" they still wake up and say, "I had a dream that I was a chicken last night!"

[Laughs]. Beautiful. I'd love to know a bit more about how we can develop a better relationship with our dreams. First of all, how we can keep our dreams conscious if that is an important part of this process. But then how we can understand our dreams and make meaning from the symbolism that we are dreaming. 'Cause for myself, like, I know I'm dreaming but I don't remember them. And I often have that moment of waking up and trying to catch the dream and hold it and then it's gone in an instant. What is the work that we can do to know it?

First step is to get a dream journal, or even use the speech-to-text function on your phone. As soon as you open your eyes, record something. Even if you write, "Can't remember a dream." Most people, if they do that, within three days are remembering dreams. It's just that easy. Now a lot of people will decide they're not going to write down a dream unless it's complete, and that's a big

mistake. So I bet when you wake up you do have fragments like, oh, there was this elephant and there was a Walmart and I don't know what I saw, a hotdog? People will toss it away if it isn't coherent. But write it all down because an elephant is a symbol of something and it stands as valid all by itself. Each of those images can be analysed and reveal something to you. For example, as we explore the image of an elephant, at first we'll notice personal associations, but also many myths involve elephants and they give us information about what elephants have meant in the unconscious minds of antiquity. There's an organisation called ARAS whose website holds a compendium of archetypal images and related writings. There's also an incredible book called *The Book of Symbols* put out by Taschen. We could research actual biological information about elephants and wonder how that might be used as psychological metaphors. Eventually we gather all these images and ideas and work them, weave them into a story that feels right. Notice how that feels in the body and your emotions and record any insights. If you can, go into a meditative state and talk to it. 'Cause in the dream world elephants can talk.

A question I often encourage people to ask is, "What are you here to teach me?" Almost always the elephant will go, "I'm glad you asked that question!" And then it will show you something about your psyche. It's very trippy.

[Laughs]. That's incredible. So just to summarise what I heard, which is amazing, the archetype or the symbol develops its meaning through many generations of myth creation and storytelling essentially. And then the cerebral understanding of what we know about this particular symbol also shapes the meaning. Then there's the subjective relationship with that symbol, what it has to say for the individual.

The purely personal experience as well, yes. If you can bring yourself down to a relaxed state, that place between sleeping and waking, which many traditions try to cultivate, go back to the image and just regard it until it begins to move autonomously. Then the game is on! We begin to interact and that interaction changes us. So, was Jung a mystic? He would have said, "no way." Do I think he was a mystic based on my understanding of him? Absolutely. But in his day if he decided he was going to promote himself as a mystic his career would have been destroyed and his psychiatric

work would have been invalidated. While he was having his extraordinary visions he was determined to examine them with empirical objectivity, scrutinise them, and report them with as much scientific rigour as he could so it wasn't dismissed as poetry, or worse. And he did that so well he became world renowned for articulating extraordinary experiences, discovering their meaning and making them valid.

And so your capacity as a Jungian analyst is dependent on how much you wrestle and interact with your own interior life. Then it sounds like you've also done an incredible amount of work and research into archetypes and symbolism. How does all of this play out in an analysis session?

In Jung's model of the psyche, you and I both have a Self. And that Self is not fully incarnated in the body so to speak. It's held in a more

rarified archetypal level. That Self creates a derivative image of its wholeness in the psyche of the infant. So each person is born with a unique configuration. Over the life span, as we mature and age, the body grows as well as our psychological capacities. The Self is constantly pressing on us to embody a little more of its potentials. When that pressure to



grow is thwarted, people become symptomatic. The symptoms could be as mild as anxiety or inadequate access to feelings. People generally come into the office because they have some complaint. Something's not working or feeling right. I use dreams to try to get a sense of what is impairing the ego-Self relationship. I'm also using my mind to listen, track and watch how you're responding to what's being said. I'm listening for how you're adapting to your various life circumstances. I'm also listening to what you constellate in me as you're talking. Because my body has its own responding mechanism, it gives me information about the energy you give off. The question always is, how can I understand where you're stuck and how can I language it so that you become curious about it? Sometimes just the act of being delicately curious of exactly the right thing can open everything up.

Yeah, I love that. I love that. And I feel like we could be doing that more with one another in our daily conversations, our communications. Paying attention to the subtle cues that we're giving each other that can invite a deeper investigation or liberation.

Exactly. Different psychological models have different goals. Because Jung was interested in the relationship between the Self and the ego we have the task of enriching that relationship. Somebody who does cognitive behavioural therapy might have the goal of helping your ego becoming more successful at achieving

its goals with less stress. So again, the journey that you take shapes who you are at the end of it. We may become incredibly clever about achieving our ego ideals and when you arrive at those ideals you will be a certain kind of person. If you are trying to resolve the obstructions between you and the Self, at the end of the journey you will be a rather different person.

Do you come to a client with the belief that they know fully what the obstructions are in their life? That this knowledge, everything they need, is deep within them? Is that how you would approach it, so that you're helping them to see the truth that they already have?

If you come into my consulting room and you're sitting there and you say, "Oh, my brother's a jerk. I'm always upset about him. I've got to figure this out." The ego, which is your waking self, comes in and

announces what it wants me to know but that might not be what's useful. It might not even be true. It might not even be what the psyche's actually upset about, but it's what the ego is hypothesising it's upset about. I always want to let somebody know that I hear them. It's like, "Okay, you came in because your relationship with the brother's really tumultuous and it's upsetting you. I know that's where you want to start. Tell me a dream." Because the dream will actually set the priority, which often is not what the ego thinks it is. In this day and age where most therapies are ego-reinforcing, that seems very strange. People come in with a consumer mentality saying, "Well I told you I want to talk about my brother, why am I talking about my childhood?" Because they've been entrained into this system where I should just be pleasing their ego during a session. Most of what people want is to help reduce the anxiety that the ego is feeling and to reinforce the ego's sense of wellbeing which often can lock people into a frame that is strangling their growth. So one of the things that some people find when they work with me is they really don't want to be in analysis. They actually just wanted their ego affirmed. Because when we begin actually looking at un-obstructing the relationship to the Self, their ego's primacy is shifted—for most people that's a terrifying prospect.

Because the ego wants to be better than?

Right. Most people's egos think that they are the king or the queen of their world. If somebody is really interested in Individuation, which was Jung's word for the ideal outcome of an analysis, they're actually interested in surrendering fully to the Self and its actualising demand and having someone help them tolerate the transformational process that will be required for them to incarnate their true potential. This is where what Jung thought of as an outcome and what I understand as a Hermetic Kabbalist as an outcome fully

align. The whole goal of my spiritual work, although the methodology is different, is to be able to shape the personality or help somebody shape their personality in such a way that they become more fully responsive to spiritual impulses that are seeking to be expressed through them. The word “Kabbalah” means to be receptive, to receive. So we might say that the whole system of Kabbalah is about how you become receptive to the Divine. Jung was actually saying the same thing. He said he didn’t know what God was but he knew what the various images of God are, and he knew how potent they are. He renamed it the Self. I know this thing called the Self exists because I see it in my dreams and the dreams of my clients. When it activates, people move into a storm of transformation. If they resist they get really sick. So I’ve got to figure out a way to partner with them so they can emerge from this incredible demand to grow and feel that they are fuller and more authentic at the end of it. To be an individual means that I am looking to the Self, the most authentic aspect of my being, to tell me who I am. I’m no longer looking at the culture to tell me who I am.

Mm. One thing I don’t understand is the function of the ego for the self, you know, how is the ego serving the self?

Jung felt the ego is important to the Self. It is the incarnated extension that has lived experiences which the Self cannot have in its rarefied archetypal state. This also speaks to the larger question of why does God create things? Why did God create humanity? In the Hermetic tradition the answer to that is God wants to experience itself in all its possible manifestations including the physical world. It wants to feel that. In Hinduism they say Shiva is the enjoyer of all, that God is an experience-hungry force. God is desirous, why else would God set anything in motion? In fact, maybe God is the most purely desirous being. God is the one that desired the universe into creation and desired you into manifestation. All this intentionality is very extraordinary. It’s said we are made in the image of God, the microcosmic-macrocosmic equivalent. So often we’ll hear in hackneyed New Age circles, “as above, so below.” It could also be worded as, “as within, so without.” But that was a very arcane mystery. Today that doesn’t sound so strange anymore, that the way I structure my perception of the world and the way I orient towards it actually creates my experiences, but in ancient cultures only initiates were thinking that way. The masses were thinking stuff just happens to them.

But all of the dreaming and the myths and stories they were telling was an act of doing this work. Could we say?

Absolutely, it’s the phenomena of being human. Because even natural humanity that has no impulse towards accelerating their self-development is being influenced by the great churning engine of the universe. Still today not everybody has awoken to the fact that they can facilitate the journey of their self-development. The metaphor I like to use is that

if we’re honest, most human beings are sitting in an enormous warm lazy river on inner tubes that have televisions and refrigerators and cell phones and they’re just floating down the river.

They’re in the collective drift. And a very small number of people somehow become aware that they’re drifting and sometimes as resistance, or sometimes as an act of radical self-discovery, they put their feet down on the river bed and stand up perpendicular to the water! Then they start to feel the current of the collective pressing on them, they feel people as

they drift by. Then they can generate their own emotional response to stimulus rather than being led along in the collective agreement of responses and feelings. Jung called that the rehabilitation of the feeling function.

Right. That is to be an individual or to individuate. The whole country might be in love with Trump, projecting bizarre messianic fantasies on him—when people are living in a church community where that is thrumming and thrumming, if they have not learned to be an individual they will find themselves feeling and believing that because the community believes it. Jung felt if we are oriented to the Self and not the collective then we can actually serve a purpose on Earth to speak to something or act in ways that are not conditioned by the collective. To act in ways that free people from the drift, not mire them in it. The finest artists do that. The finest writers do that. Visionaries and people who are on the path who seem very ordinary can do that.

It's striking me as really odd right now that we know we can be creators of culture and creators of story and fashion and things that are external to us and yet we haven't come to understand that we can be the creators of our own lives.

Right. Because that would require an enormous revolution of philosophy and knowledge, let alone experience. But it is happening. Because even one person standing perpendicular to the drift has such a significant influence over their

community. It creates a context that can stimulate those who are sleeping adrift to stand up, and a community of those who are standing against the drift can change the world. 



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JUDY ATKINSON IS A TRAUMA HEALER

It is a strange but also somewhat exciting time in the evolution of the Australian psyche. Storms have gathered, fires have raged, extremism has risen, sacred sites have been closed, and wallets, hearts and minds have been opened. The past few years in Australia have been a swirling, mixed bag of big feelings, seismic events and a shift in the collective consciousness that can only really come from mass suffering. But what really is suffering?

I am reminded of the statement: “the problem is the portal.” And when I sit in alignment with the ways of my Old People, the master creators, I am reminded that each injustice or wrongdoing is a breeding ground for a strengthened spirit and an alignment with ourselves as spiritual beings, rather than just humans. Although for some people this can take place as an intense enlightenment and profound awakening, sometimes it’s just about believing in a higher power because at least then there is something to blame.

Judy Atkinson’s work has largely focussed around the concept of *dadirri*, or deep listening. At a time like this, when it is so easy to sit across from the perceived opposition and fire automatic rounds until finally they either implode or rise up with a grenade, *dadirri* is our greatest gift. The awake and asleep parts of ourselves and of our country must listen to each other, for there are no social and environmental triumphs worth winning if they are achieved through war, violent speech or hatred. The process and the outcome are one.

Judy is a contemporary healer. Her voice is gentle and soothing but you wouldn’t mess with her—there is something in her energy field that is both potent and wise. She arrives at my house after a long drive and we go straight into a beautiful high energy that permeates the rest of our yarn together.

SUBJECT

Judy Atkinson

OCCUPATION

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INTERVIEWER

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WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

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LYDIA FAIRHALL: Alright I've pressed record. And I always start by taking a moment to acknowledge country. So we're on the homelands of the Gubbi Gubbi or Kabi Kabi people. And I offer my deep respects to the traditional owners. But first and foremost I want to acknowledge country and this beautiful land and space that we create and connect on and all of the abundance and love and support that it provides. It's a big job [laughs]. The trees have got a big job.

JUDY ATKINSON: They do.

I thought we might be able to start right at the top with a high energy concept that most Blackfellas grow up learning about or feeling, which is *dadirri*. You've spoken a lot about this in your work, in that each nation or community has a different word for it, but the understanding is very similar across the country. How do you feel talking about that?

When I first realised that I had to try to understand the violence that I was seeing in Cape York with the Aboriginal Co-ordinating Council, I started to think about how I would do that, because it's a hard topic for people to engage with. Somebody handed me the words of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann. *Dadirri*,

the concept of deep inner listening and quiet, still awareness. She had given these words to the Australian nation on the 26th of January 1988 as a gift from Aboriginal people. And

I thought, that's what I have to do. I have to learn to really deeply listen. Listen beyond the ears, listen with every part of my being.

So this process of listening became the core of my research work, for my PhD. But it also became a major part of my life. Just slowing myself down. 'Cause I'm a very energetic person and my mind is always asking questions of why, what? So it was all about slowing down and listening. That had a profound effect, because I was actually starting to return to Cape York to do my PhD, and I got to the Great Keppel Islands. And it was 26th of January, 1992. A little boat went past with the flag up and we had the flag on our boat. I just jumped in and swam ashore, had a talk to them and they said, "What are you doing?" I told them where I was headed and why, and they said, "Well why don't you stay here? This is where your dad was born. This is where his mother ended up after they moved away from Taroom." So in the first three months I visited with the different groups in the Central Queensland region, to say I was there and I was thinking of doing a PhD there, and what did they feel about that? And they were really excited about the focus on violence. So I settled down and started to sit and listen. And sometimes what people were telling me was really different to what their bodies were saying. Like fellas down on the riverbank drinking, with lots and lots of injuries from fighting, saying, "Oh, there's no violence here." And yet obviously the grog was contributing to their behaviour. So I didn't challenge that. I was just trying to make sense of what I was seeing versus what I was hearing. And asking myself, *Why would people say this when clearly it's not the case?*

One of the things you talk about is that under anger is always grief. Which rings so true. And your work has really been about supporting people through that grief. And also the systems behind the support as well, challenging and bettering the systems. So you must have witnessed hundreds of moments where you've seen people shift from being in the trauma and almost ascending into a more spiritual consciousness. What does that moment look like for people? And are the same ingredients there each time?

I understood through my work that under anger was always grief. And the change in people started to happen when they dropped into the grief. They were frightened of the

anger because too many times the anger took them into behaviours they felt were not good. But the grief also came with their stories. Often it would be a movement of the body and you would see that somebody had just connected with something in their past. We were doing a lot of dance and music and art—deep conversations, I was trying to work out how to respond to the violence-trauma stories. So they'd dance and all of a sudden a person's body would start to tremble. I'd see that and just move across gently to stand next to them. And I would see they were holding the grief in. I would say, "Can I put my hand on your back please?" As soon as I did their body would descend into grieving, crying, the deep crying, the shaking. That then gave them permission to go back into the anger—the story where the anger was held—because anger is a legitimate feeling if we've been hurt, violated in any way. And that would give them the permission to start moving back through the storylines that had brought them to this place. Suddenly they had permission to not just talk about their own story of what happened with their dad or their mum and the generations before, they were able to investigate, to find the information themselves. So it gave them permission to go deeper into what I call the trauma stories.

Rather than just sit in the place of anger as a reactive response.

Let me tell you a couple of stories around that. I did this work for over four years at Emu Park near Yeppoon. And when the anger comes up in Aboriginal ceremonial processes there is a way that the anger can be danced out—talked out, moved out, in ceremony. When you come onto the lore ground there is an agreement that there will be no fighting. And there is a structured process of engaging in the energy of the violations they feel have happened over the period of time between ceremony. So everybody comes to the lore ground and they clean up the anger. And I brought this into what we were doing with the trauma work. There was one time the group I was working with got into some really deep conflicts. The anger was there. Under the anger was the felt sense that men were dominating, women aren't being heard, that the stories that needed to come out were being pushed down in this incredible conflict. We got through it. It was intense and hard work. It was like, "Wow." As soon as the heat of that deep conflict started to settle, I looked outside and there were five fire engines. All the bush outside had been on fire. They weren't anymore. The outside had been cleansed. And we weren't even aware it had all happened because we were so involved in the heat of cleaning up that deep, painful inner group conflict.

It's really interesting that you've brought that up. One, because the whole nation's talking about it and for good reason with the current bushfires.

But I was reading some stuff from a teacher who is heavily skilled in Chinese medicine. And he's talking about heat and fire being connected to yang and action. And that part of the climate response needs to be focused on water, coolness, yin and stillness. And you've spoken in your work about being an action person, and I think a lot of us can relate to that. Because our compulsion is to get in and chew on a good problem and solve it. But I wonder if we're looking at responses to whatever injustice it might be, whether it's a climate context or Aboriginal politics, in the wrong way. And are we better off using a different kind of medicine?

I think anger is a critically important element or emotion for us to move into and hear. People think it's a negative. In fact there is no healing without us first dropping into the anger. Unfortunately the anger comes out, but it comes out in violence, violence on self and close family community. It's not focused on the reason for the anger—the violations. Now let me speak to

where water comes in. We were in another dispute and this time it was very much between men and women because one woman felt that a man was behaving sexually. So there was this big heated discussion about it. And I'm sitting there thinking, *dadirri, breathe. Just be still and see where this conversation is going to take them all. Don't go in and tell them how to*

solve it. They've got to sort it out. Just as I felt it was coming to a conclusion I hear somebody yell, "Look what's happening out there!" Three whales were swimming up through the sea passageway beside us. We all went to the window, "Oh! Wow. Look! Two adults and a baby. What is the message for us?" And suddenly all of the energy of that anger and the woman being really distressed started to shift, and we saw what she was talking about was not really anger at these men but what had happened to her previously, it came out in her grief. And she saw that. So under anger is always grief. When we access that we can start to see a way through it, a process we can work with. I think this is where Australia has to be at this time. If we don't grieve what we're doing to this land and the people on this land, and therefore the future of our children on this land that we now call Australia, it's going to continue to burn. And I'm talking seriously here. There's a big spiritual lesson coming to us.

There is. You can feel it. You know, we have platforms and we have spaces and opportunities to talk about trauma. And they exist. They could be better but they do exist. Yet I feel like sometimes we don't have the platforms to talk about those moments where the shift happens. And when we're referencing any kind of time of elation or real connection with our spiritual selves and the spiritual landscape of this country, it's always in reference to totemism or the land. And I wonder if you were going to describe the moments in your life where you felt that feeling of ecstasy in and amongst all of these stories of trauma that you've held and listened to and carried and healed, what are some of those stand-out moments?

Okay. So I'm going to push the word ecstasy aside and go back to *dadirri*. And bring out that sense that as we drop into ourselves and we're listening to the land around us or what the birds, the trees, the animals are saying, sometimes we don't hear the message or see it. So I've got a few, again, examples of how I've had to be woken up a bit. One time we were cleaning

out this building after we'd done a workshop and I went out to the door to get a broom. There were about 10 of us cleaning. When I opened the door there was an emu standing there. And being outside of my still place, I turned around and said, "Hey! Everybody! Look, there's an emu!" And people came and this emu was just standing a few metres away from me at the door. And people said, "Judy, look at the emu." And I'm going, "Yeah, I'm looking." And they said, "No, Judy, look at the emu. The emu is just focused on you. Every time you move, it moves. What is it saying to you?" And I went, "Oh." So I took a step out and I moved my body. And it moved its body in the same way. Then I started to dance and it danced too. So emu from that particular country is my totem. And that bird moved with me, followed me dancing for over half an hour, all the way. Now how do you explain that? Initially, I wasn't in that still place, I was working. But this moment was happening and I wouldn't have tuned into it were it not for the people telling me to slow down and look, listen. So

I'm trying now always to take notice of the messages that I'm getting, to know if I'm walking in a good way. If I'm doing the things that the ancestors want me to do.

What I talk about a lot is, do you know your life purpose? Every child is born with a life purpose. It's sung. By the midwives in the ears of the newborn—birthing consciousness at the time of birth. I'm talking Aboriginal children. My great grandmother was a midwife and there's a ceremonial process of giving birth and attending to birth. After the placenta has been removed and the baby and mother has been cleaned up, the midwife walks away for a while and she sings into the ear of the newborn baby all the songs it needs for its life purpose.



So that emu was the first time I realised that what I was doing was what I needed to do with my life. As I was dancing I kept saying in my mind, *Mother, tell me, what do I have to do now? Where do I have to go? What path do I have to take now?* And she just kept dancing and I kept following her. Or she kept following me, both ways. Something else. I became aware she was blind in one eye. And I remember thinking, *Be focused about this violence trauma work.* See, it's listening to what's happening around you. And being still inside yourself by not assuming that the emu was an object that you just respond to, like, "Oh, there's an emu."

Yes. And I think often in nature it's giving us that blueprint and that guidance path of which way we should or shouldn't be going and what we need to be turning our focus and energy to. It's interesting 'cause we're sitting here on a property of 10 acres in the middle of lots and lots of bushland. And one of the first things we talked about when we met this morning was the challenges of being in the cities. So I wonder how do you connect to that consciousness when you live in a busy place with five million other people and there's all of these buildings around you and not the opportunity to engage and interact with the natural environment?

So I get asked a lot to go to Melbourne and Sydney and Brisbane. And I fly on a plane and I get off and I get in a taxi. I get into a motel and I know the next morning I've got to do a keynote at a conference.

I'm a very lucky person that I wake up just before the sun rises. And I spend some time then checking in, just how I'm feeling in myself. I'm not going to use the word "meditation." It's just a check in. It's thinking about what today is going to bring me as a teaching. Then I open myself to that. I have no expectations because I know that somewhere in that day something will happen that will teach me something if I'm ready to learn it. Then you're walking down the street, there's people sleeping on the side who are homeless. There's this busyness. And I have to keep bringing myself back to what is it that I have to achieve or learn today? I know what I have to do with my life. I can't get off that path. But each day there's something that comes to me to make me slow down a bit and understand that the messages are coming to me in a good way.

One of the deep lessons that I've been going through this year in particular has been about stillness. And earlier you were talking about *dadirri* as a way of listening with your whole body. And I've read some of your previous work where you liken it to mindfulness, as a way to help people understand what it is.

I do a lot of work with kids in schools where I'm telling them about the reptilian brain and how a lizard or a snake is flight, fight and freeze—the kids understand that. And then up here is the mammalian brain, so we look at the kangaroo and her baby in the pouch. What are they feeling together? The feeling place. We've been divorced from our feeling place. And the prefrontal lobes are the thinking place. What we know now in science, I'm bringing Western science into this conversation,

and I think it also connects very much with cultural knowledge, we know now there's a heart brain. The heart responds to when you feel good when you're in country and you're sitting quietly and you're in connection. Your heart slows down and you're just there in the presence. Then there's the gut brain. So we talk about a gut feeling. But it's also the food we put into our gut. Not just the physical food that we eat but the other food that goes in there as we digest, all of the other negative or positive things in our life. I want to actually name now, in *dadirri*, the feet brain. This feeling of when you've got your feet on the ground. I know some people who take you down into the river, you stand in the water and then they put water on you so your essence can run down into the stream. And the water takes the messages out that you're now in country. It's your feet that are in the water. The feet are being cleansed. You walk out and can then have a sense of being in connection with that country which is speaking to you. When we're healthy in our body, mind, soul, spirit, we know when we're unsafe or safe. When we've been damaged or hurt we don't know, so we keep going back into unsafe situations, and our feet are taking us there.

Absolutely. Going back to that moment when you were at the beginning of your journey with your PhD and your research is around trying to understand complex violence in our communities. Complex trauma, I realised by that time.

Complex trauma. So you've started this field work. And the research participants stopped at some point and said that they were ready to move on from talking about trauma to talking about healing. How important is it as a nation and as individuals for us to focus on our spiritual selves and our spiritual practices rather than re-living the trauma that we've experienced? And how do we make that shift?

Trauma unhealed is transferred to others. So there has to be healing. And the healing that works, that I know, actually taps deeply into Aboriginal cultural and spiritual practices. So it's about art, music, dance, theatre. It's about doing art-focused group work, you know, a lot of people sitting around painting and talking together. What I introduced quite quickly was the

intentional process of ceremony as I knew it. Not claiming ceremony the way Elders would. Ceremony within the intentional process as we were exploring a way through our pain.

Ceremony where we could talk, listen, learn together about what it is to be fully human in our pain and grief and in our healing—reclaiming our sacred selves.

If Australia doesn't get real, Australia is going to do what every other country has done through centuries of colonisation. When I'm looking at the Americans at the moment I'm seeing the demise of the Roman empire. As the Romans got engaged with their Colosseum and their animals and the fighting humans who were slaves, they lost the essence of who they could have been. The British in America are doing the same now, they've lost a sense of who they could become because they have pushed aside the First Nations people of what we call the USA. It's the same in all colonised countries. In Australia we First Nations people have more to offer Australia than they will ever, ever be able to give us.

It's the other way around. The power dynamic is the other way around. Right. So I'm going to go back to your question. If we don't deal with the trauma stories, they get transferred down across generations and we keep acting them out, and that's what I'm seeing today. I can map you seven generations of people who are now locked into drugs. Three generations of Aboriginal women from one family all in Alice Springs prison. When we, with intent, start to come together and do the healing work, we do the ceremonial work, not only do we sing up the ancestors to come and work with us, we start to sing up the songs that give a lie to the story that says this country was settled, for Christ's sake, when they brought the prison boats into Sydney Cove. And we acknowledge that the story is full of traumatised people who'd been moved off their land to make way for sheep and cattle, like the Irish, who also became convicts transported to this country. Through this process we get ourselves healthy enough to start to lead the nation. We have to take responsibility for being a sovereign people.

Absolutely. You know, when I began to sit more in a place of consciousness, I felt a lot of my desires within the physical world diminish. Particularly in relation to my career. And for a period it did feel very quiet. I think I'm starting to come out of that quietness now. But I've realised that what I've been left with after that experience is really the knowledge that we are all creators. And not just creators in an artistic context. But actually, you know, our Old People were the masters. Sung us to come here. We are the creators of the future.



Absolutely. They were the masters of creation. So I sat in that space of creation and within a few short years I had this beautiful house and this beautiful exciting partner in my life. And my two kids and money in the bank and none of that was anywhere in my sphere of influence growing up whatsoever. But I think when it feels like life is just happening to us and when we identify with the injustice rather than with ourselves as creators, how do we ever pull ourselves out? And it's exactly what you were saying.

It's actually naming and knowing our pain, and working with it, dancing it, transforming it into healing action. That's the ceremonies that Aboriginal people did. They had an ongoing, fortnightly, full moon, half moon get-together to transform pain

distress disorder and bad behaviour into healing practice. At nighttime they talked and they feasted. They did it on the land. And they did it with intent. So if we sit back and wait for that to happen for us, it will never happen. We've got to take responsibility for that now. I also think that we've actually got to know the stories that hold us together. I can tell you story after story where I've been somewhere and I'm talking and somebody said, "Hey stop Judy, stop. Just stop where you are now. Do you realise?" And then they give me a story at that place, and suddenly I feel more deeply part of it. So one time I was working in Cairns. And there's that part of me that's logical and reasonable. We were pulling together research that shows how much Aboriginal people knew about rainforest and what we could do and things like that. And then one of the elder women came to me and said, "I would like you to support me to bring some young people off the streets into the TAFE," 23 young people it was, "to do a course. To go out and pick up the seeds and things from rainforest remnants and propagate them in nurseries. And then plant them between the rainforest remnants linking them together, so that they bring the rainforest back together again." So I funded that. And that was all good. We went up to see the nursery and these young fellas working there. And this elder woman was doing some magic stuff with them. And she was teaching them all about healthy sexuality while she was doing that. They were saying, "Aunty, why do we have to do this?" "Well," she tells them, "all those animals over here and all these animals over here," she was pointing to the two separate rainforest remnants, "they're doing the wrong thing. Like having sex with the wrong nearby kin. They're interbreeding and that's not good. That's not good. So when we plant the seedling trees we are creating pathways so they don't interbreed. And that's healthy." So anyway I went up to see her this day, and on this trip we were driving across the Atherton Tablelands. And I was telling her I'd just come back from the APY lands and while I was down there we women were talking about the Seven Sisters Dreaming. And it's funny that I just brought this conversation up when we were driving in this place. I had no consciousness about it. It was just a conversation. And she said, "Judy, stop the car." So I stopped the car. And she says, "Look around you, what do you see?" I said, "There's some hills there and there." She said, "How many?"

[Laughs]. And I counted them, seven. She said, "There's the Seven Sisters, they come out of the land here." And they come out of the land in different parts of Australia, but this is where they come out here. And those places will be places of great healing, they are sites and sources of lore. They are all over Australia. It's interesting to me that I get called to a lot to those places, or maybe I am just more aware, and so our conversations can be real about the stories of these healing places. The Seven Sisters is a story we need to know right now with the level of violence on Aboriginal women and children. Those seven sisters all got together and that naughty man was chasing them. And he was after the youngest sister. So they kept moving and kept moving and then leapt into the skies. So there's a big story there for women to come together and stand up and speak out against male violence. Let me be very clear. Aboriginal women always, before Cook, challenged and spoke out and confronted male violence. And there were lore processes for men who were not doing the right thing to be punished

or brought to account for their behaviour. But the colonisers came here from the patriarchal society with their patriarchal legal system. In many of the communities where I have worked there are extreme levels of violence against women and children. So the Seven Sisters Dreaming has a beautiful message for us when we get together. When we stand up and speak out. Protect your sisters. Protect our children. And I love that there are good men standing with us working for change.

Yes. Every Aboriginal nation or clan has their own stories or even their own name for the Dreaming. One thing I think that's really consistent is that we do understand it isn't something that only happened in the past. It's a non-linear process. And we are absolutely still in that point of creation. Do many Australians ask you about your understanding of Dreaming? And how do you describe it when they do? [Laughs].

People will ask and I'll say, "I'll tell you a story."

Yeah. So what is this Dreaming? I mean, is it alive still today or is it finished just because the prison ships came into Sydney Cove? Well no, it's not finished. It's part of the land and it's part of the Elders—there's a difference between being an elder and being an Elder in Eldership. So when Elders or Old People are in deep Eldership, they're in touch with Country. They're in touch with the stories that are coming out and up and down to create things, old and new. And I'm a writer. So I like to write theatre. And I haven't shared all the stories because there's a time when they need to be shared. We have to allow for that to come at the right time. I often will be sitting listening in a group and I'll watch somebody start to talk and all of a sudden I'll see their aura. And I'll know that in that moment they're talking something that needs to be said. So it's kind of stilling yourself for that truth to come through. It's being in the moment and allowing whatever needs to come to you come to you for you to feel in yourself that you're doing the right thing. That you're walking the right path.

I've been reading some stuff lately about healing, which is a critical part of the process. But allowing is really the next part after that. It's like once that healing work is done then it's about allowing and being in the receiving mode.

I think it's how we find what healing is. We use that word healing a lot. As you know it's from the old Norse word, *læknir*, meaning a return to wholeness. And what is the return to wholeness? In Aboriginal cultures there was a belief system by anthropologists that Aboriginal people didn't know the fact of physiological conception. Whereas it was

more that at the time, the old women would know which of the spiritual creative forces entered the body of the child, which would be called the Totem or the place. So you've got a part of who you are from being conceived here, in your Dreaming. And then later on the child is watched, and I'm talking BC, Before Cook, but I still think it happens in different places now. The child is watched by the Old People and they start to refer to that child in another way. So it could be wombat, it could be a butterfly. That's a beautiful Totem, butterfly, waving through with the small motions of the wings adding change. And then there's a time when in the movement process you will be given another Totem. So there'd be many parts of what people give you for your journey through life. It's dependent on men and women separately, watching the child or the children as they grow. Seeing them in their beauty, their life journey. We don't do that in this society today. We just label our kids as mad or bad and think they're going to end up in juvenile detention and move onto the pathway into prison. This is funny, I don't talk about these things with people. I use the word "story" a lot, it's the Dreaming but it is not quite. We are born into stories. We are our stories. Story is sacred. It's these stories that have been given to me at different times that help me make sense of the world in which I live. And it's just the way I live my life now. There's another terminology I use a lot: trust. Whatever's happening will take you where you need to go. Just trust this process. 

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EMMANUEL VAUGHAN-LEE IS A SUFI TEACHER

I came to my conversation with Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee in a grim mood. Australia was burning and choking in smoke and our political leaders seemed thoroughly uninterested in addressing the root cause—anthropogenic climate change. Chatting about mysticism during a national and arguably global crisis seemed somehow indulgent. In the week since we spoke, my thoughts have returned to our conversation with surprising frequency. I’ve found myself pausing to take in the “beauty within the darkness”—watching our parched garden soaking up long-awaited rain, my little daughter’s joy as we dance together in the kitchen, and the generosity of strangers helping folks get back on their feet in the wake of the fires. These moments have been a salve for a battered heart.

Emmanuel offers us a way of engaging with the uncertainty, turmoil and bleakness of this moment with grace. The mysticism he shares is not removed from the realities of the world—alone in a cave dwelling in disembodied bliss. His is a spiritual path accessible to all of us deep in the fray of busy professional and personal lives. In addition to being a spiritual teacher and lineage successor in the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya Sufi Order, Emmanuel is founder of the thriving online publication, *Emergence*—which explores the intersection of ecology, culture and spirituality—the director of several award-winning films, a musician and composer, a husband and a father to two children. His life is a testament to the Sufi principle of “solitude in the crowd” encouraging one to “be in the marketplace while still working with true Reality/God.” I encountered in Emmanuel a familiar blend of grounded lightness, humour, gravitas, compassion, directness, clarity and humility that I’ve experienced in the presence of adepts of other spiritual traditions. These qualities would seem to be who we all are at our core. And yet they are rarely displayed by our current political leaders. I’m left yearning for a world where the path of the mystic and the path of the leader merge.

SUBJECT

Emmanuel
Vaughan-Lee

OCCUPATION

Filmmaker, composer
and Naqshbandi
Sufi teacher

INTERVIEWER

Cameron Elliot

PHOTOGRAPHER

Myrtle Vaughan-Lee

LOCATION

Inverness, US

DATE

January, 2020

CAMERON ELLIOT: Let's start with how you personally define mysticism.

EMMANUEL VAUGHAN-LEE: Well it's a very challenging question. It's inherent in all the spiritual schools of practice that seek out a more direct relationship with the divine. There's a wonderful quote from a Sufi who says, "Why settle for second-hand reports when you can have a first-hand experience?" And Sufism is the background that I was raised in and now teach, that grew out of the Islamic Muslim context. There are many different practices for creating that relationship. It could be through music, dance. In the tradition I come from, the Naqshbandi tradition, it is actually through silence. Often people think of whirling dervishes when they think of Sufism, where they dance in this beautiful circle and create an ecstatic state, this trance that would put them in a space of relationship with the divine. In my tradition it's actually through silence that this trance-like state is created. Many of the practices are designed to transcend the ego so that you are more porous and open to experiencing a divine connection. And as mystics often say, it's really a lifetime journey of emptying oneself so one can be filled more and more with that divine substance. The mystics also say that ultimately you are divine, and as much as you're making a journey to God you're also making a journey to the divine within yourself. And at the same time, one cannot truly know the divine. So it's this very precarious path of being open to something that you ultimately will never understand.

Which is hard for us humans who like to know everything! It sounds like you are describing a process of surrendering.

Very much so. In Sufism, surrender is one of the central aspects of the mystical journey.

At the start it's about surrendering the surface level desires, what the ego wants. But as the journey goes on the surrender becomes much deeper and you have to surrender every aspect of yourself until you are left empty and naked before God—vulnerable, not knowing what will happen. There are many ways to describe the divine. Actually, the Beloved is a term that is frequently used in Sufism because there is a desire to have an intimacy and a connection with the divine. But ultimately there are many ways to come home and the terminology is really secondary to the experience. Ultimately, one is left in a space of tremendous silence where words can never describe what is experienced.

You're reminding me of a moment in your film *Earthrise*. I can't remember which astronaut said it but he was talking about the utter silence of space, and then looking back on earth and thinking about all the hustle and bustle and noise that happens down here.

Yeah. I was very moved hearing the astronauts describe their experience 'cause in many ways it parallels what a mystical experience is—being taken so much out of yourself and into a space which is so vast one cannot comprehend it. There's so much silence and there's so much emptiness. And from that space one can glimpse oneself, the world, other people, with a clarity you don't have when you're caught within the ego.

Some of the astronauts in the Apollo program came back from their trip and searched for a language and system that would help them comprehend what they had experienced up there and how to then digest and integrate that. One even ended up studying mysticism.

Yeah, it's not surprising. I was interested to learn that you come from a long lineage of Sufi masters. Your father is the current holder of that lineage. I was thinking before, was this a path you felt free to choose? Or was it one that was imposed on you?

Ooh I would say ultimately it was a choice. Definitely as a teenager and somebody who had grown up in this tradition, sometimes it felt like an imposition. There was a period of my life where I stepped away from it

and said, "I need some space from this." But after several years and different experiences, I made the decision to fully commit myself to studying and ultimately taking on teaching

responsibilities. So I don't think I ever left the path. It was more like I needed to spend time away from that world on my own. It coincided with leaving home and going off to study music in Boston when I was 18. Just wanting to experience life outside of a spiritual context. I grew up in what you might call a modern day ashram where my father's teacher lived below us in a three-storey house. And every day between 80 and 100 people would come to our house from 2pm to 8pm to meditate and have spiritual discussion. That was my life until I moved to America from the UK with my family as a teenager. So out of that context I could break the rules, not feel like I was under some sort of spiritual microscope. I eventually got out of that rebellious stage in my early 20s and became very much involved with this Sufi lineage.

And so this lineage, you mentioned briefly that it's a silent tradition. Is there a regular practice you do, or principles you share?

In many Sufi traditions there's something called the *dhikr*, which is a form of prayer or mantra spoken aloud. Sometimes it can be done individually, sometimes in a group. The Naqshbandis, many, many hundreds of years ago, made the decision to bring the *dhikr* from an external expression into an internal repetition of the name of God through one's breath. And so the primary practice on this path is a silent *dhikr*. A constant remembrance of the divine through breath.

Sufis feel that it is through remembrance that one becomes closer to the divine—that one begins to lift the veils of separation between them and God.

And the breath of course is the most fundamental primal act of our human existence. Without breath we are no longer alive. But by infusing it with prayer we can harness the power of that central human act and transform it into an process of conscious remembrance of the divine. So that is the primary practice. We also have a meditation practice for stilling the mind and dissolving ego consciousness. There's this beautiful practice called "solitude in the crowd," which is outwardly to be immersed in life, as the world is, but inwardly to behold this connection and presence with the divine. Outwardly to be with people and inwardly to be with God. Because Sufism is not a monastic tradition, we don't go off and become monks or nuns away from the world. You live in the world. You have families. You have jobs. You participate in community. And that can be a very challenging rub because it's much easier in some ways to say, "I want to focus on prayer and divine remembrance," and go live in a monastery, in other words, not immediately engage with the distractions of life. But to do that in the midst of life can be the sandpaper that rubs down the ego. So it's an opportunity to bow down and be in surrender to something greater than oneself while in the midst of life. So it's a very, very challenging principle but also a defining one for this Sufi tradition.

So let's speak a bit about your work in the world. You're a filmmaker, a musician, you compose a lot of the music for your films. You're also a spiritual teacher. Founder of a magazine. Anything I've missed?

A father. A husband [laughs].

Yes! A lot of roles to be played there. How do you straddle all of that as well as your spiritual life? Is there a deep division? Or is that a false dichotomy?

I used to try to have a division and it didn't work. Only way that I have been able to manage my life is to think of it as one fluid experience. Of course, practically speaking, there are times for my own spiritual practice, times when I'm teaching, when I'm working on a film and working on the magazine. But I don't think of them as separate vocations. I hold it all together as one. The work I've been

doing through the magazine is in many ways an expression of my own spiritual path, and a translation of the mystic's desire for there to be no separation between the human and the divine. And the need to respond to what we're dealing with right now on the planet, which is a human-centric worldview gone rampant to the point where we're destroying everything else that is not us. That is the antithesis of any sort of mystical understanding and truth. The fundamental tenet of Sufism, as it is with all mystical traditions, is that there is just one.

Sometimes I worry that we might not have enough time to make this leap we need to see from egocentric to ecocentric thinking, thinking about the bigger "we."

More and more I'm subscribing to the long game. As much as I would like to imagine things shifting in the next 20 years, it seems that's becoming more and more unlikely. It takes time for empires

to die. As we are seeing [laughs]. It took a long time for the Roman Empire to die finally. It was dying for a long time, and we seem to be doing something quite similar on a global scale. I've gone through this myself, of maybe realising that in my lifetime I will not see a shift to a global society that reflects spiritual values, that respects the non-human world. That learns to live in balance with the world. That doesn't have its whole systems and structures built on greed and materialism. I may not see that in my lifetime. But there is tremendous value in working towards this shift because the seeds we sow now will eventually sprout. Maybe not how we imagine them to look, but they will. Sometimes we have to do things not knowing what the result's going to be.

If we only prayed because we knew we would get a response, very few people in the world would be praying right now.

Whether we see the results of that tomorrow, a year, a hundred years, 500 years, it doesn't change, at least not for me, the desire to live my life according to spiritual values and work for a future that is possible. I remember hearing a woman named Winona LaDuke, who's a Native American activist, at a conference. She said if you're not thinking about multigenerational impacts of the work you're doing, you're not thinking long enough. I think that's very true. We talk about a thousand-plus years to break down plastic that we are throwing endlessly into our oceans and our forests. We should be thinking about a thousand years' worth of impact for what we are doing in a positive sense and understand that we are dealing with a challenge which is so great that we cannot be caught in human-based time scales. We can't only think that we have to see successful results for us to want to do this work, for us to want to shift this way of being that our culture has created. We need to do it regardless of what is happening.

I describe what you're describing as cathedral thinking—that our generation may just put down the concrete or the footstones. Next generation puts up the pillars. And then the final generation puts the roof on. So we may never see the finished cathedral. I guess that's where surrender and acceptance come in.

And humility and compassion and patience, and the fact that there is beauty to be experienced along the road. That's been revealed to me more and more. That there is beauty present within the darkness and the destruction we're

experiencing. It's there. Doesn't mean that destruction and darkness is not real and that we shouldn't be fully conscious of what's happening, but in the midst of that there is beauty and we can be in remembrance of that beauty. Whether that is an act of humility and compassion that we experience from another human being. Or a plant that was not burned amidst the



destructive fires that have been plaguing my home and yours. The beauty that is present in a birdcall, in a barren landscape. The remembrance and recognition of what is there is so important because it's easy to say it's all over, it's not going to work, whatever's going to happen in the future I won't be around for. That is a selfish way of being.

You mentioned before the distractions of the modern world. Obviously there's a new platform popping up every week vying for our attention. How do you go about maintaining a mystical connection with the world amongst so much distraction?

Well discipline I would say. I wake up between 4:30 and 5:00 every morning. And the first

thing I do is meditate and pray for an hour. I mean the wonderful thing about 4:30 or 5:00 in the morning, at least where I live, is the world is quiet. So I do that, and then start engaging with life.

All of us determine how much we play into the distractions of a modern life.

We can decide to have alerts of every single app pinging us at all times or not. And that level of control is something we can create in all of our interactions. It's hard but I think that is what is needed if one is to create a space that allows for a more meaningful way to live. So you have to have discipline. I think you have to be willing to say, "No, that tweet can wait. That email can wait. I don't really need to know what the latest Netflix series is. I don't need to scroll through Instagram to see what somebody else is doing." Yet because of these distractions and the imbalances in the world I do think it is probably the hardest time in many ways to be a serious mystical seeker. But at the same time we're not dealing with the hordes of Genghis Khan sweeping across the Middle Eastern plains. There's a wonderful story that my father shared with me. And it's the story of a Sufi's encounter with Genghis Khan as they were sweeping across the Middle East and raping and pillaging cities. The dervishes [students] come to the master and say, "Genghis Khan is coming, what are we going to do?" And the teacher says, "I've taught you how to be ducks. Now swim." It's like spiritual practice can give us the tools to learn to deal with the devastation that we're confronted with. It doesn't make it easy. We're going to feel grief and pain. But it means that we don't have to become completely gripped in the fear of what's happening, and also means we have to embody a certain detachment and a realisation that what's going to happen may be out of our control. But a duck can dive through the waves, rises to the surface and can float on the water in the midst of the storm. 🦆➡️

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Unlocking Sacred Geometry

A professional artist and colour therapist, Stephanie June Ellis has dedicated more than 10 years to studying the complex geometric patterns which make up the universe—from the planetary positions in the solar system to the symmetrical lines on a leaf. She runs workshops and retreats across Australia and overseas which guide people through a creative process in geometric pattern work, reconnecting them with the symbols and equations deep within. Here she shares her insights into the universal language of geometry.



Art as processing the unconscious

Have you ever sat by a river on a rainy day and watched the circles emanate from a single drop of rain? Have you noticed an imperfect pentagon on a blueberry or in the core of an apple, or looked at a snowflake close up and wondered why the molecules join to each other in a hexagon? These are the things that led me on a spiralling journey, as a pilgrim, marvelling at all the magnificent complexities in life one can't even hope to explain. In an attempt to make sense of these patterns, shapes and numbers, I began to draw.

Art became my daily practice, my meditation, my spiritual discipline. And it seemed that my art always

focused on geometric patterns. I found comfort in drawing lines and circles—the repetitive motion and symmetry put me in a trance and was evidently my own attempt at self-healing. I started to research the meaning behind circles and that's when the sanskrit word *mandala* surfaced. Digging deeper, I found significance and comfort in the writings of psychoanalyst Carl Jung and philosopher Alan Watts, the artwork of MC Escher, and the wisdom in Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism. Jung's teachings in particular showed me that the psyche has the potential to reorganise, self-heal and manifest itself through circular figures.

What is sacred about geometry?

Something becomes sacred when it is ascribed meaning that goes beyond the ego. Mystics and theologians have contemplated the language of geometry for centuries. Galileo described the universe as “a large book written in the language of mathematics which can only be read by those with the knowledge of its geometrical figures.” Plato’s *Timaeus and Critias*, an elaborate dialogue of the formation of the universe, talks of the platonic solids and how their different combinations reveal every possible geometric law forming the physical reality we experience. Plato teaches us to follow the natural order, from the motions of the planets down to the human sphere. Michael S. Schneider describes the language of Sacred Geometry better than most: “As soon as you enter upon the world of sacred, symbolic or philosophical geometry—from your first, thoughtful construction of a circle with the circumference divided into its natural six parts—your mind is opened to new influences that stimulate and refine it. You begin to see, as never before, the wonderfully patterned beauty of creation.”



“The laws of geometry are not human inventions. They are found ready-made in nature and hold truth that is the same in all times and all places and is older than the world itself.”

John Mitchell

The birth of formation

The circle, or sphere, is infinitely symmetrical and has the smallest surface area, making it the most efficient shape possible. Nature uses her resources extremely effectively and we can see spheres everywhere. The root of Sacred Geometry begins with what we call the *vesica piscis*, a latin term which literally translates to “fish bladder.” It quite clearly resembles an eye or a seed pod, or a woman’s genitalia. All life is created within it.

To draw this symbol, one would create a circle and divide it by a straight line representing the horizon (Diagram 1). A second circle with the same radius is composed by placing the compass point on the intersection at either east or west (Diagram 2). The harmonious pairing of opposites unite to create north, south and a midpoint. The almond shape, the vesica, or what we call a bisect, is a symbol found throughout the world. In Islamic art it is called *qalb*, which is Arabic for “heart”; in Egypt, the *ankh*; in Hindu art, *yonis*, meaning “birth” in sanskrit; in Christian art, the *mandorla*.

Moving onwards in a clockwise or anti-clockwise motion, we create what’s known as the Seed of Life (Diagram 3). The Seed of Life is a symbol of abundance and reproduction and carries with it the building blocks to life, molecules, organisms and the underlying structure

Diagram 1:

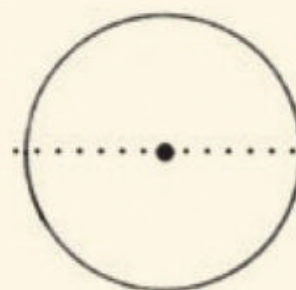
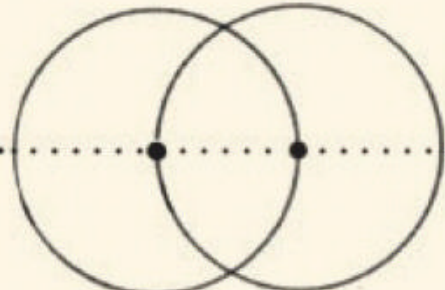
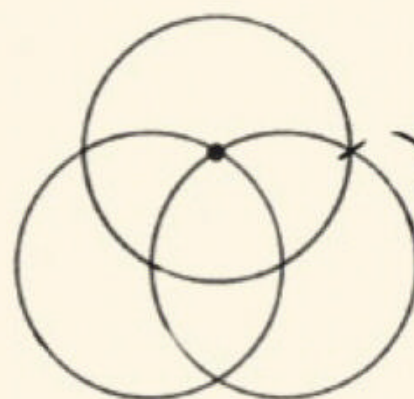


Diagram 2:



Vesica
The union
of opposites

Diagram 3:



Birth's mother -
from each cross over

Diagram 4:

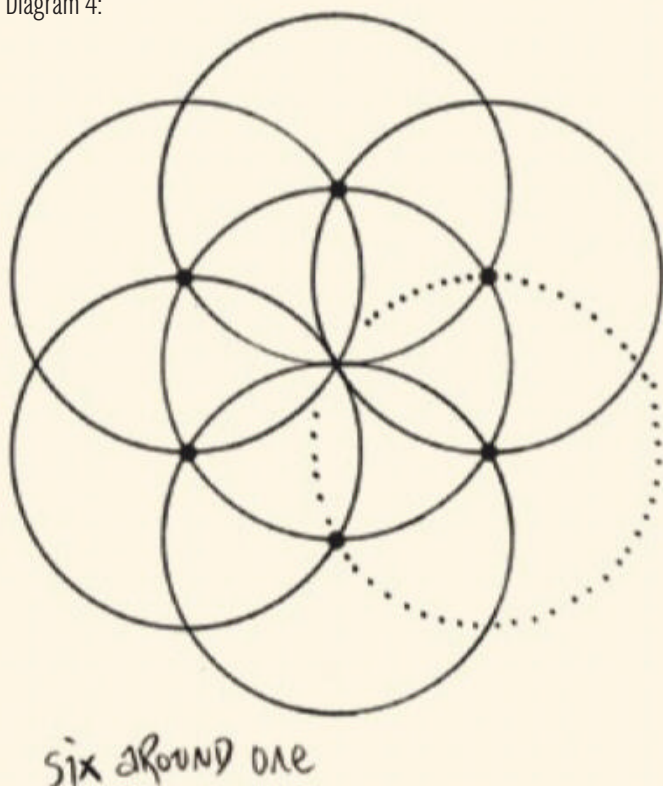
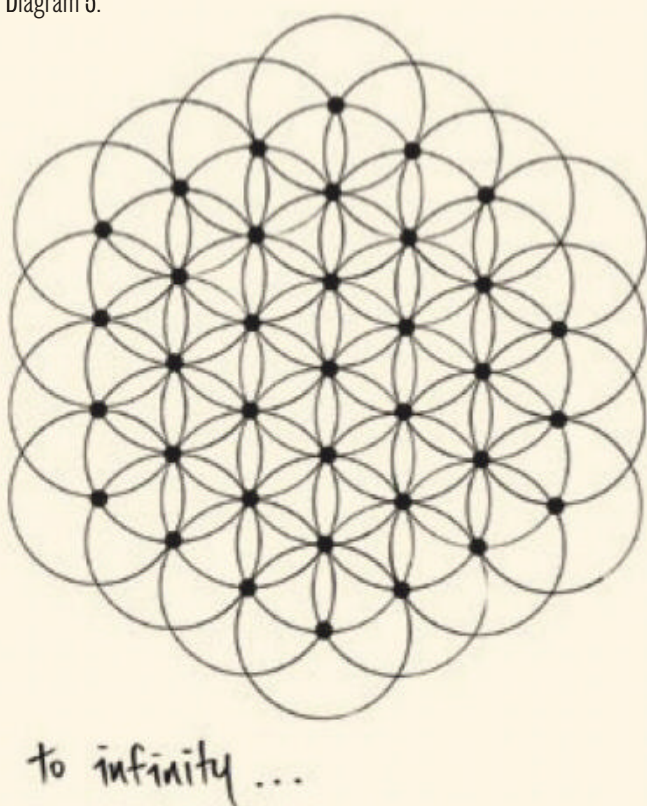


Diagram 5:



of flowers, honeycombs, snowflakes and the disposition of molecules. It is also related to the six periods of creation in Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

Moving to Diagram 4, we see that joining all the black dots will create six equal sides, revealing a hexagon. Look closer again. Two equal triangles sit inside, one pointing north and another pointing south. You've now created a six-pointed star, known as a hexagram. Some may be familiar with this six-pointed star as the Seal of Solomon, a signet ring attributed to King Solomon in medieval Jewish tradition, which is now renowned as the Star of David. As it happens, one will also find the hidden geometry of Stonehenge to be, indeed, the Seal of Solomon.

The Seed of Life can be continued indefinitely by creating what's known as the Flower of Life (Diagram 5). Imagine this symbol as a sphere, spinning on its axis and contemplate its infinite nature. Everything is happening at the same time. A multi-dimensional continuum of infinite possibilities.

There are some fascinating facts about the science of the cosmos and visions of planetary movements that relate to these formations. For example, in *A Little Book of Coincidence*, John Martineau says, "Two groups of asteroids called 'The Trojans', move around Jupiter's orbit, 60 degrees ahead and 60 degrees behind. The partnership perpetually moves around the sun as though held in place by the spokes of a wheel. The positions of the trojan clusters are known as the Laplace Points, with Sun, Jupiter & Trojans forming gravitationally balanced equilateral triangles."

Sacred Geometry in architecture

History shows us that ancient societies thought holistically. Arguably, the lessons of the past have been subsumed by motives of monetary profit, and so most architecture today, especially apartment buildings, is not cohesive with nature. As the population increases so do these box-like apartments, and yet there is no doubt humans feel more at peace when we incorporate the harmonious workings of geometry into our homes.

Occasionally these universal geometric truths are celebrated through design. Canberra, for instance, is steeped in esoteric symbolism. If you have ever driven around the city, you probably noticed how easy it is to navigate—that everything makes sense. Certain proportions have a more powerful effect on us,

whether we realise them or not. Old historical places like London and Paris, or ancient civilisations like Italy, Greece and India not only incorporate geometrical principles in their town planning, they also have sacred architecture built upon them—the dome of Saint Paul’s and Saint Peter’s cathedrals, Notre Dame de Paris, The Taj Mahal and the Greek Parthenon to name a few.

Closer to home, the Balinese adhere to strict and sacred laws of building, and put utmost importance on communal living. A common design theme that occurs in a traditional Balinese temple or *pura* (sanskrit for “walled city”) is tripartite divisions. These include *nista mandala* (the outer zone), *madya mandala* (the middle zone) and *utama mandala* (the holiest and most sacred zone).

Tibetan Buddhist Sand Mandala

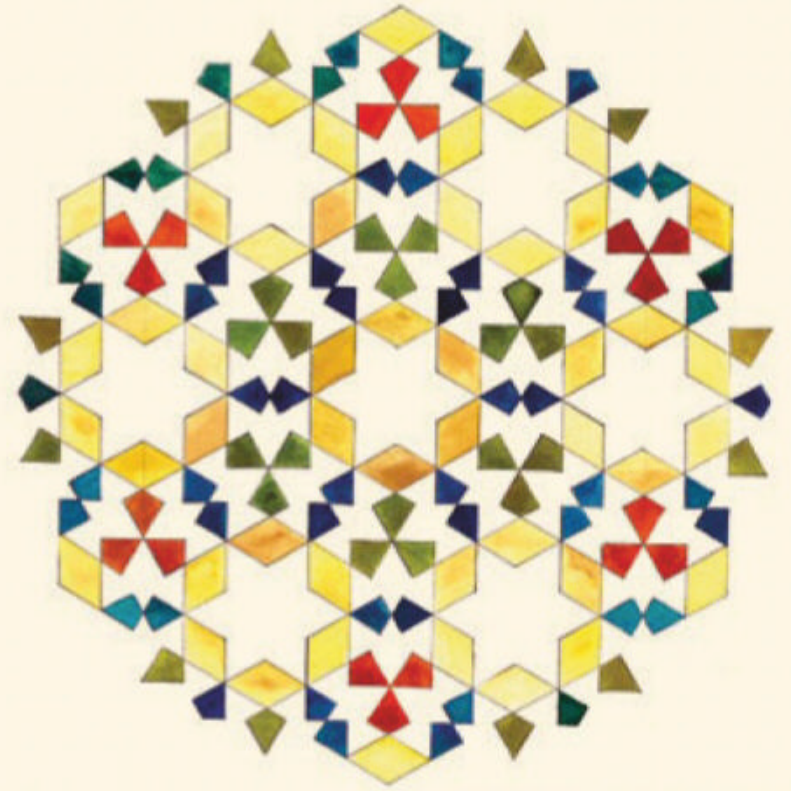
A mandala is a series of geometric patterns representing an imaginary palace that is contemplated during meditation. According to Buddhist scripture, mandalas constructed from sand transmit positive energies to the environment and to the people who view them. They were introduced by the Buddha himself and vary in design—each possessing its own unique teaching.

The construction of a sand mandala begins with a ceremony in which monks bless the site and call forth forces through chants, meditation and music. Over the course of 10 days the monks pour millions of tiny grains of brightly coloured sand from traditional metal funnels called *chak-purs*, and produce a beautiful mandala. Shortly after its completion, the monks dismantle the mandala to symbolise the impermanence of all that exists, and disperse the sand to share its blessing.

Buddhism teaches us that the paths to liberation from *samsara* (the cycle of rebirth) not only manifest themselves as enlightened energies, but also as the neurotic states of our mind, such as pride or arrogance, anger, jealousy, attachment and ignorance. Instead of denying and ignoring the shadow within ourselves, it is best to recognise, accept them and transform them into positive energies along the way. “To become aware of the mandala is to become conscious of what is going on around us, and it is this consciousness that helps us see our connection to the world and to one another.” — Lauri Bailey Cunningham

To learn more about Stephanie’s work,
go to stephaniejuneellis.com

Geometric pattern from *Geomotherapy Book*, published in 2019
by Stephanie June Ellis



*“Our soul has a spark of the logos
that allows us to understand and
look at the world in concepts,
symbols and equations.”*

Socrates

Tibetan Monks from the Drepung Loseling Phukhang Monastery spread the message of world peace and compassion as they built a Sand Mandala, an ancient art form from Tibetan Buddhism, inside the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library. October 9-13, 2010



Embracing the Mysteries of Biodynamics

Peter Kearney has been studying and practising biodynamic farming for more than 20 years. Based in rural Queensland, he runs workshops and speaks at conferences on how this method of organic agriculture—which was introduced by Austrian philosopher and clairvoyant Rudolf Steiner in 1924—encompasses mystical ideas to restore and enhance ecological harmony. He shares his insights into biodynamics and how it plays out in his own backyard.



Doorway to a mystery

My biodynamics journey began at Samford Valley Steiner School where our four children were students. I became fascinated with Rudolf Steiner's ideas, and in particular biodynamics. As an experienced organic gardener, I was surprised at the vitality and productivity of the first biodynamic garden I saw, which belonged to a parent at the school. The doorway to a mystery had opened and I am still on that journey 23 years later.





Steiner's agricultural impulse

Steiner brought biodynamics to the world in 1924 when asked by farmers in Europe for help. They had recently adopted chemical farming and were experiencing increased yields but lower fertility in their plants and animals. Steiner was an influential thinker in Europe, having the unique capacity to postulate new systems and ways of being that blended material and spiritual understandings of life processes.

Steiner's agricultural impulse was to create ecological harmony in a way that would stimulate life and enhance the quality and energy of each individual crop. Diversity of plant life is essential in his theory, as is observation—the ability to read both the macro and micro of what he called a “farm organism.” Steiner believed that when we eat food that is biodynamically grown, our bodies can digest it in the most effective way. This enhances our bodies physically and our consciousness, so that we are more capable of thinking holistically and in a way that continues to stimulate life in our ecosystems.





Soil and plant vitality

In my experience as an urban farmer, biodynamics is a very efficient way to build soil life and maintain plant vitality. It produces food with exquisite flavour that reflects its nutrient-dense qualities and high life force. I find the plants are more resilient to heat extremes—my vegetables are still hanging in there at 35 to 40 degrees Celsius. I also include local native animals in my urban farm system as I don't have livestock other than chickens. The interesting thing is that I rarely have insect attacks or native animals eating my crops. Although I can't prove this, I am sure it's because of how I work with the soil and plants by combining organic and biodynamic practices. Animals and insects normally don't attack plants that have a strong life force, which evolves from the soil.



Working with the planets

Working with planetary movements is common right across biodynamic farming, and extends to optimal times for planting, making compost, growing green manure and harvesting major crops. A grower can ignore this information and still produce good quality produce or work with it and appreciate its capacity to balance and harmonise life's rhythms.

Biodynamic preparations

I regularly apply biodynamic soil and plant preparations in my practice. The preparations are typically made from herbs, cow manure and minerals, and prepared in a very particular way to intensify their impact. For example, Horn Silica is a commonly used spray for promoting plant vigour and reducing susceptibility to disease. I normally use about two grams in 30 litres of water to cover two hectares. When it comes to preparing, I stir the liquid rapidly, creating a vortex, and then reverse the direction, order and chaos, which draws energy into the mixture. The potency of the preparation can also be increased by applying it at the most appropriate time according to planetary and constellation positions. This can be determined using the biodynamic calendar which shows the relationships between the twelve constellations, the moon, the earth and the other planets in our solar system. Horn Silica, for example, would normally be applied in times during the month when the moon is in “fire” and “air” constellations.



The human-garden connection

The individuality of the garden or farm is a very interesting concept in biodynamics. Steiner referred to the “farm organism” as encompassing minerals, plants, animals, human beings, land history, climate and connection to cosmic cycles. “If brought together in a dynamic way, they interact positively to express the farm’s unique potential or farm individuality,” Rudolf Steiner said in his 1924 Agriculture Lectures.

I’ve found that my state of being has a direct impact on life in the garden. There is a wonderful two-way flow of energy between myself and all living things. Developing practices of concentrated observation and contemplation, with a quiet state of mind, have been helpful in working more strongly with this energy flow. I enjoy a meditation in the garden each morning.

Peter Kearney runs biodynamic introductory courses in Brisbane and Melbourne each year and also provides advisory services with a focus on urban agriculture. For more information, go to www.myfoodgarden.com.au



Allen Ginsberg and Catherine Ingram, British Columbia, 1984

IN THE DEEP WITH CATHERINE INGRAM

Jack Kerouac's Secret Tome

The Beat Generation of the 1950s, arguably the original American hipsters, erupted into a post-war era primed for freedom of every kind—explorations in Zen, psychedelics, sexuality, jazz, wanderlust and new forms of literature.

The Beat writers, in bravely recording their newfound freedom, had to fight for the right to cut loose, winning several obscenity trials, such as the censures of Allen Ginsberg's epic poem "Howl" and William Burroughs's novel *Naked Lunch*. These works and many others like them would subsequently be found on the bookshelves of nearly every hippie commune and literary bookstore in the English-speaking world. The most famous and influential work of the Beat literature was *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, a novel that inspired young seekers then and ever since to use any journey as an inner journey and let the road itself dictate the travel plan. *On the Road* would go on to influence the work of Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, David Bowie, Hunter S. Thompson, Jim Morrison and many others in the decades before and after Kerouac's death in 1969. (In 2007, Russell Brand

made a documentary journey for the BBC entitled *On the Road*, in which Brand traversed the American back roads coast to coast in his homage to Kerouac).

I had a peripheral connection to the Beats and knew several of them, including Allen Ginsberg. In 1984, I invited Ginsberg to give a writing retreat at a small island centre in British Columbia at which I was the program director. Although by then Ginsberg had won the National Book Award and was considered one of America's poet laureates, only five people enrolled for the week-long retreat. Consequently, each of us had many hours of personal tutorials with Ginsberg, and this is how I came to know of a then-obscure work of Jack Kerouac's called "List of Essentials: Belief and Technique for Modern Prose." The List was ostensibly an offering by Kerouac to help budding writers, and, as a young writer keen to hone my skill, I felt that I had stumbled upon a secret tome. On reading the List I recognised that these were dictates not only for literary prowess but for what it might mean to "be in love with your life." Maybe those two talents are one and the same.

Jack Kerouac's List of Essentials

Belief and Technique for Modern Prose

Note to reader: the list below is presented in Kerouac's original grammatical format.

1. Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy
2. Submissive to everything, open, listening
3. Try never get drunk outside yr own house
4. Be in love with yr life
5. Something that you feel will find its own form
6. Be crazy dumb saint of the mind
7. Blow as deep as you want to blow
8. Write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind
9. The unspeakable visions of the individual
10. No time for poetry but exactly what is
11. Visionary tics shivering in the chest
12. In tranced fixation dreaming upon object before you
13. Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition
14. Like Proust be an old teahead of time
15. Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog
16. The jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye
17. Write in recollection and amazement for yourself
18. Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea
19. Accept loss forever
20. Believe in the holy contour of life
21. Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind
22. Don't think of words when you stop but to see picture better
23. Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning
24. No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge
25. Write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it
26. Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form
27. In praise of Character in the Bleak inhuman Loneliness
28. Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better
29. You're a Genius all the time
30. Writer-Director of Earthly movies Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven

Catherine Ingram is an international Dharma teacher and writer. Visit her website catherineingram.com for a list of her upcoming events, and tune into her podcast *In The Deep*.