waking up

reading wisdom texts

essays by

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11/28/23 edition

When the asleep body, numb and deadened to the world of the senses, awakens, it is a resurrection that reveals to us that love is stronger than death.

bell hooks

My life has never been better! If I had a regret, it's that I didn't wake up [sooner] . . .

I want everyone to appreciate the joy and wonder of every single moment of their lives. There is a reason every day to celebrate that we're alive, that we have another day to explore whatever this gift is of being conscious, of being aware, of being aware that we are aware. That's to be celebrated!

Roland Griffiths

And happy is the one who comes to himself and awakens.

The Gospel of Truth

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Preface

It is a stunning morning here, one of those utterly perfect-weather days this late-arriving spring has decided to deal out in sequence this week, like getting a royal flush one card at a time without any need for a draw: temperature shirt-sleeve warm, light brilliant and crystal clear, everything ravishing in its glow, distinct and clear at any distance, blue sky pellucid, light breeze, well, you get the picture: perfect. I decided offhandedly to walk in Watershed Park, my local "temperate rain forest," right up the road. No special reason, just an inclination.

As soon as I started down the path from the lot, I entered that state of mind the forest often induces in me: no longer myself in any material or individuated way, just drifting out and lifting up to be with everything around me in the most intimate and amicable ways. I felt as if I was only my eyes, the kind Emerson describes as "transparent," and they were being pried wider and wider open, instilling the feeling I describe as "astoundment"—a word I borrow from S.T. Coleridge—in the final piece in this book. Surreal has come to mean many things in our cultural and creative lexicons, ranging from the utterly inward, a dreamscape generated by the unconscious mind detached from any extrinsic world; to an animation of that extrinsic world such that we see it the way a visionary does, luminous, exuberant, itself times ten. Or a hundred, rendering us transfixed in a state of joy somewhere beyond where words work. It's at that end of the super-real spectrum I prefer to live.

I had been having some trouble coming up with a title for this book. The essays seem clearly (to me) synthetic,

integral with one another, more wholistically companionable than my prose books tend to be. But finding a way to name that unity was proving challenging. Today on my walk I began to wonder how I might describe the state of mind I was experiencing and it struck me: awake, simply awake, fully awake, ultra-awake, the kind of awake that is transformative, an antidote to the ongoing drudgery of everyday life we trudge through laboriously in this cultural moment, dark enough to induce a state of chronic somnambulance, our being pulled along like dogs on leashes by whatever the cultish trope of the moment happens to be, peddled first by politicians then amplified by the tsunami of media that drowns our attention unmercifully.

One of those tropes right now is "woke," which I first encountered quite inspiringly about 10 years ago when a student of mine was trying to update me on some of the political/philosophical lingo young people were using back then. He was ultra-smart and ultra-cool. When I think of "woke" I think of him and want more and more of it. Now "woke" is an insult, and Florida is, we're being told, one of the places it "goes to die," as if dying is the preferred alternative to woke, which of course it is, that dying of the spirit that turns human beings away from one other in fear, against one another in rage, and into robotic tools for the powers that be.

So I decided that would be my title: *waking up*, a state of mind as far away from this hyperbolic, culture-war created "Florida" as it is possible to get in a cosmos that must balance life and death on a knife edge to maintain its changefulness equitably. I am not, of course, awake all the time, which is why I'm waking up so often, as you'll find out if you keep reading! I walk in the woods or by the

water every morning in the hopes that what's out there will wake me up more fully than getting out of bed did. I am always more awake after a walk than before. And some days, like today, I am uplifted so far out of myself that I am the embodiment of joy. Not the kind of joy that is raucous or overly-animated. The kind that is like the weather today, all clarity and light, very quiet, a state of being that words can point toward—god knows I've used tons of them—but can never fully describe.

I've been kind of obsessed with reading all kinds of wisdom texts since the pandemic began, all the solitary alone-time it enforced: Taoist, Buddhist, Stoic, Hermetic, Biblical, poetic, you name it, I've consumed it voraciously. I've been trying first to acquire and then to master a way, or ways, of reading that would allow those texts to release their wisdom directly and immediately to me, the way the forest does on a day like today, to induce a state of astoundment that allows me simply to "get" it, without an inordinate amount of interpretive work.

I am using the term "text" here in an uncustomarily broad way, as you'll see along the way, to include even the natural universe with its many lovely things and the laws that organize their relationships with one another and, especially, with you and me, who have extraordinary gifts to contemplate them for our own sake and, I suggest, for theirs. *Living Hidden* and *In Dreams* report on big chunks of that enterprise. This book addresses the matter even more directly by documenting in some detail how I am now processing several important (to me) texts of that sort, where, again, "text" is a very expansive category.

No one, not even the masterful visionaries I'm encountering, and certainly not me, can make you wake

up if you don't want to. All I can say is that what's over here on this side, out here in the light of being, will truly astound you, in all the best ways, if you give it a chance. And I guarantee you that if you wake up that way just once, for even a few seconds, you will never want to go back to "Florida" to stay.

. . .

My method in these essays is, as usual for me, more improvisational than plotted, more like jazz than sheet music. As I have often explained, what I write tends to come to me as I type, not vice versa; and what I end up "thinking" to arise slowly through multiple re-readings of what I write. The opposite of normal, which is me in a nutshell.

"Teaching Secrets" examines quite closely several esoteric/spiritual texts I happened to be reading simultaneously to explore how they might be coaxed to give up the "secrets" they claim to be housing. "The Time Has Come" opens a conversation about some of the things that Jesus actually said, as documented in the New Testament, by contrast with what has been made of what he said in the meantime. "Pelagius, Augustine, and the Death of Nature" explores a very pivotal moment in that "meantime," when one of history's most alluring alternative visions of Christianity didn't survive the conservative-orthodoxy obsession of the early Roman Catholic Church, to the detriment of all of us, including "nature" today. "When You Make the Two One" is a close reading of the "lost" Gospel of Thomas—a compendium of many of Jesus' sayings and parables without externally imposed narratives or commentaries—exploring his quasi-gnostic message of light, balance, and

oneness. “The Curious Cosmos” proposes a set of analogies between quantum mechanics and Taoist spiritual texts that suggest a deep relationship between the material universe and our own human presence as an intelligence witnessing it, a mutuality that, I argue, is built into the DNA of the cosmos itself. “Seeing Another Way Past Self-extinction” suggests that the ongoing climate and extinction crises afflicting earth derive at least in part from how we look at nature, from the outside rather than from within, requiring a paradigm shift at the level of perception to begin to redress. I conclude with the final talk I gave at the University of Pittsburgh in advance of my retirement, “All the Time in the World,” which argues for a qualitatively different way of thinking about how we inhabit, even embody, time in the professional arena, one that expands and slows it down to the benefit of all. And how by that means we might experience routinely, even in the workplace, the kind of astoundment I felt this morning.

Teaching Secrets

"Now wisdom is fine, but the heart leads the way."

Barry Gibb

1.

I'm reading a little book now called *The Hermetica: The Lost Wisdom of the Pharaohs*, translations of some of the teachings of a figure called Hermes Trismegistus, likely a pseudonym for a number of different authors writing in this tradition. When the book was first translated into European languages during the Renaissance (inspiring many Renaissance thinkers' values and attitudes), one popular notion was that it had been proffered by the Egyptian God Thoth (whose Greek analogue is Hermes), the godly source of all human knowledge in the remote pharaonic past, perhaps as far back as 2000 BCE, which would make the text ancestral to any number of first millennium BCE traditions, including Mosaic law and the *Old Testament*, the pre-Socratic shamanistic philosophers, even Plato, whose *Timaeus* expresses many similar ideas, as well pre-Christian proto-Gnosticism. Though direct cultural lineage would be unlikely, there are similar themes in any number of Asian texts of the first millennium BCE, including the *Upanishads*, the *Tao Te Ching*, and the *Zhuangzi*.

Current scholarship indicates that the version of the text I'm reading was most likely composed/arranged during the second and third centuries CE, the height of the

Greco-Roman synthesis, represented by figures like Marcus Aurelius, Longinus, Zeno and Cicero, for example, where it is possible, again, to find companionable analogues. Though early Christian scholars dismissed the book as heretically illegitimate, there is subsequent evidence (supplemented after the Egyptian hieroglyphs were finally translated in the 19th century) to suggest that, whenever it may have been written, it does in fact represent some of the basic concepts and overall vision that animated pharaonic Egyptian spiritual ideology.

My only previous encounter with the name Hermes Trismegistus was several years ago, via the History Channel series called "Ancient Aliens." Georgio Tsoukalos, the charmingly passionate spokesman for most of the episodes, referred to him and his work a number of times, by my recollection, enough so to leave it tantalizingly near in my memory, if only for the exotic sound of the name. The author(s) of the text locates the wisdom contained quite clearly in very ancient times, when the gods were actually here to speak to us, which is, I assume, the appeal of the work to the Ancient Alien community. I tend to be positively inclined to texts like this: esoteric, on the fringes of legitimacy. And I had certain expectations of it, that it might for example be cryptic, mysterious, or just New-Agey eerie. It is none of those things, quite lucid, really, matter of fact, and entirely legible.

I learned in the reading that our current term "hermetic" is derived from this famous incarnation of Hermes, the thrice-great! My commonplace sense of the connotations of that term led me to believe that any philosophical system or tradition thus characterized

would by recondite, available only to initiates, likely abstruse, even coded in some way: "hermetically sealed," as it were, like a can of peaches. Hermes himself says repeatedly that his wisdom is and will be opaque to subsequent readers. He sends his words forth, for example, under this warrant:

> *Be unseen*
> *and undiscovered*
> *by all those*
> *who will come and go*
> *wandering*
> *the wastelands of life.*
> *Be hidden,*
> *until an older heaven*
> *births human beings*
> *who are worthy of your wisdom.* (x)

He says further, as an initiation-concluding warning:

> *Now that you have learnt these secrets*
> *you must promise to keep silence*
> *and never to reveal*
> *how the rebirth is transmitted.*
> *These teachings have been set down in private*
> *to be read only by those*
> *whom Atum himself wills to know them.* (127)

Given all of this hocus-pocus, I was quite surprised to find how translucently clear Hermes' teachings actually were. Anyone with a middle-school reader's skills could process the text quite readily, no exotic language or arcane terminology, not even complex metaphors. So why I wondered is this wisdom considered insular, opaque, accessible only to an initiated elite? Hermes

says a number of times along the way, for example, that simply reading his words will not reveal their true meanings. What then will, is what I wondered, and often wonder when I'm confronted by similar warnings about other apparently simple wisdom-texts? Are they available to a reader like me, just as I am in my own cultural time and place? If so, how do I have to approach them to unlock those meanings?

Hermes, by way of explanation, says this:

> *Only if you contemplate*
> *all that I have said*
> *will you know it to be true.*
> *If you do not—*
> *you will not believe me.*
> *For belief grows from contemplation*
> *and disbelief from lack of thought.*
> *Speech alone cannot convey the Truth,*
> *but the power of Mind is extraordinary,*
> *and when it has been led by speech*
> *to think things through thoroughly,*
> *it can find peace in true beliefs.*
> *Only if grasped by thought, in this way,*
> *will my teachings be understood.*
> *I have, as far as possible,*
> *painted for you a likeness of Atum,*
> *which if gazed upon*
> *with the eyes of your heart*
> *will lead you to the upward path.* (127-8)

There is, then, a method he proposes to take this "journey of Knowledge" (128) to its proper destination. I'll work backwards through this passage to try to delineate its steps:

1. Hermes has used words to paint a likeness of Atum.
2. Those words must be first apprehended and then grasped by thought.
3. This is accomplished by some sort of contemplation that allows one to think things through thoroughly, using Mind not speech.
4. By this means, one can envision and then gaze upon—with the eyes of the heart—the image of Atum that Hermes' words have painted, a portal to "peace in true beliefs."

This is a start, I suppose, one that may seem alien to contemporary (i.e., postmodernist) Western readers. The conflation of the verbal with the visual (not to mention mind and heart, which I'll get to later!), while endemic to social media and advertising, is generally atypical in our established philosophical, scholarly and spiritual discourses. Poetry is the only textual medium where there is a tradition in which these two media are cooperative, even synergistic, in nature. A poet like William Blake comes to mind. He illustrated many of his most famous poetic works—with the poems embedded in the images—and studying the visual component often changes dramatically how one views the textual component (and vice-versa), revealing its secrets. More generally, the concept of the poetic image (absent an illustration) implies an intrinsic sensory dimension—visual, aural, tactile—to a particular arrangement of words. Images are not paintings, of course, but they can legitimately be described as verbal attempts to simulate "painting a picture" for "the eyes of the heart." Ezra Pound, for example, says an image "presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instance of

time," more akin in temporal terms to how we view a painting than how we read a text. And even more generally, at least in the Romantic tradition, individual words are presumed from the outset (etymologically) to be founded on direct perceptions of the natural world, retaining in their histories (if not in their moments of reception) an extra-verbal sensory connection to the material world. Percy Bysshe Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" is the most radical argument for this way of seeing language as not just depicting but creating worlds. And in "Kubla Khan," Samuel Taylor Coleridge asserts that this world-making power is more than imaginary:

> *. . . with music loud and long,*
> *I would build that dome in air,*
> *That sunny dome! those caves of ice!*
> *And all who heard should see them there . . .*

This figurative power of words—using their music (and not their meanings) to build domes and caves "in air" that those hearing would see there, literally, an extraordinary, almost godly, creative power—is, though, rarely an experiential outcome for the average reader these days. To take seriously a way of reading that disorients meaning away from words, to music for example (as poetry does to some degree), or even more radically toward modes of thinking and reception that are entirely pre- or post-verbal (as Hermes, most Romantic theorists and poets, and many ancient thinkers, from Lao Tzu to Longinus all do) is a very hard sell in the current philosophical arena.

Be that as it may, a way of reading that is quasi-poetic rather than narrative or logical may be one place to

start this process, at least as it pertains to steps two and three above. I've written about such a mode of reading more extensively in *Rereading Poets: The Life of the Author* and *The Imagination*. In general, though, this quasi-poetic method of reading has certain distinctive features that, for me at least, can entice poetic texts (using that word in the "uncustomarily broad way" I describe in the Preface) to reveal their "hidden meanings" more readily, matter-of-factly, and directly. It is founded in a very intense mode of "listening" (thus my preoccupation later here with Jesus' admonition about having "ears to hear"), which then generates a serendipitous back and forth unique to each situation—like any good conversation—creating meanings that could not possibly arise from either side alone, akin to what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls "creative reading." It is as if a third party emerges to elide the two identity centers who opened the transaction. Thus my reference to the "life" of the author in the book's title, which is equivalent in status to my "life" in that moment; and my preference for "rereading", i.e., taking many quick passes at a text—sometimes separated by minutes, sometimes by years—rather than one slow slog through it, extending the partnership over time, more like a friendship than a "date."

It is also a fully embodied experience. As Emily Dickinson says, "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry." For me, when my head is right for such a topping, every person, thing or text I encounter is potentially just such a "poem." It takes a lot of energy for me to do that, so practically (and unfortunately) I am on auto-pilot way more than I should be. But I aspire to use this method for every kind of non-trivial interaction I have with the

"outside" world, to feel as if I'm engaged in an intimate dialogue with another intelligence as it strives, with me, to unravel some secret this beautiful universe has been keeping under wraps until now, right now, this moment of co-presence.

The odd thing about *The Hermetica*, though, to my way of reading, is that its meanings don't seem to be deeply concealed at all, not at least at first glance or in the conventional ways that poetry sometimes seems to hide what it teaches (and I highlight "seems" to suggest that this is always merely an illusion, not a reality.) The strategy Hermes recommends for unconcealing his Truth, once the words are received, is to "contemplate" them (30) in a very specific way. He founds this mode of contemplation on a radical separation of Mind from sensory experience and language:

> *Accept these pure offerings of speech*
> *from a heart and soul uplifted.*
> *You of whom no words can tell,*
> *no tongue can speak,*
> *and only silence can declare*. (133)
>
> . . .
>
> *I am alien to all that is seen*
> *with bodily eyesight*
> *I sing a song of my soul . . .*
> *and I no longer see with bodily eyes*
> *but witness with Mind*. (138)
>
> . . .
>
> *Language is inadequate.*
> *The gods sing a hymn of silence,*
> *and I am silently singing*. (139)

He takes this sense of disembodied perception (and the incapacity of language to render it directly) in the process of contemplation to a whole other level when he admonishes his reader to:

> *Tear off this cloak of shadows.*
> *This web of ignorance.*
> *These shackles of decay.*
> *This living death.*
> *This conscious corpse.*
> *This portable tomb.*
> *This robber in the house.*
> *This enemy that hates all that you love.*
> *This garment that smothers you*
> *and holds you down.* (108-9)

Yikes! So, it is clearly not the sensorial body that will "lead you to the House of Knowledge/ [where] you will see with the heart/ the brilliant brightness." (109)

Hermes also offers this further admonishment:

> *So, listen, men of clay.*
> *If you do not pay keen attention,*
> *my words will fly past you,*
> *and wing their way back to the source*
> *from which they come.* (16)

As I said, aside from poetry, Western discourses and genres don't lend themselves even remotely to this sort of contemplation. There are, of course, traditions of meditation, Buddhism for example, that proffer methods for entering into and engaging with something akin to the "silent singing" Hermes claims to be employing. But they don't necessarily require paying

"keen attention" to words to keep them from flying back to their sources. Quite the opposite most often.

The kind of synesthesia Hermes is recommending may make clearer sense in the context of pharaonic Egypt, where the currency of literacy was the hieroglyph, literally a picture transformed into a symbol of meaning and carved in stone. Word and image remain married as one, not simply via a long, embedded etymological trail, but right in front of one's eyes. And they don't change over time, at least in the short-run of a millennium or two. This seems to me to be one reason that Hermes believes his message will not only be corrupted, but entirely lost, once it is translated into Western languages, specifically Greek, as he explains:

> *My teachings will seem more obscure*
> *in times to come,*
> *when they are translated*
> *from our Egyptian mother tongue*
> *into that of the Greeks.*
> *Translation will distort much of their meaning.*
> *Expressed in our native language*
> *the teachings are clear and simple*. (xxxv)

As I said, Hermes' lessons actually do seem quite clear and simple in my language, but I take his warning to heart: Much of their meaning may in fact be lost by translation into a language that is neither illustrative nor materially embodied in the ways his is, another impediment, perhaps insuperable, to mastering his secrets. He further warns about other effects of this translational process, specifically the clarity of his message becoming more and more obfuscated by pseudo-philosophers:

I say that in times to come
no one will pursue philosophy
with single-mindedness
and purity of heart.
Those with a grudging
and ungenerous temperament
will try to prevent men discovering
the priceless gift of immortality.
Philosophy will become confused,
making it hard to comprehend.
It will be corrupted
by spurious speculation. (3)

I am of course reading this text on top of 2500 years of a philosophical tradition, some of which I'm quite familiar with, that Hermes would likely be dismissive toward in exactly the way he describes, another barrier I need to contend with.

Still, there's a lot to be said for Hermes' recipe for contemplation, and it's appealing to me. Except (an almost fatal "except" for me) for its utter derogation of the body on the path toward godliness. While he offers a few tantalizing hints that the body may in fact have some function in this process, and I'll outline that just below, it is only in the interim, until Mind can fully take over; for it is Mind, the immaterial quality we share with Atum, that allows us both to understand godliness and, for those who properly use it, to enter our own godly state. This radical mind/body schism at the heart of the Hermetic ontology makes Descartes look like a piker, as in this passage, where language is once again disenfranchised (along with sensation) as a medium to promote contemplation:

You will only experience this supreme vision
when you stop talking about it,
for this knowledge is deep silence
and tranquillity of the senses.
He who knows
the beauty of Primal Goodness
perceives nothing else.
He doesn't listen to anything.
He cannot move his body at all.
He forgets all physicals sensations
and is still. (122-3)

Again, yikes: the paralysis of the body in the service of Mind, a fully disembodied function in Hermes's system!

So is there any role for the body to play on the path to pure Mind? I have no idea what the ancient Egyptian term for "brain" was, or what its role and status was in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, but Hermes never uses that term even once in his teachings. Clearly it is not where Mind resides. He does talk about the role of Soul as a mode of embodiment in the cosmos this way:

Energy is infused into the Cosmos from Eternity
and it in turn infuses Life into all things within it.
Mind and Soul
are manifestations of Light and Life.
Everything moves by the power of Soul.
The body of the Cosmos,
within which all bodies are contained,
is completely saturated with Soul.
. . .

Soul fills and encompasses
the whole body of the Cosmos. (38-9)

So at least on the universal level, body and soul seem to remain companionable and unified.

But when it comes to an internal organ for embodied reception on the individual human level, the only term he recurs to is "heart." It's possible, of course, that he, or his translators, are deploying it in the vague generic way we often do. But he uses it oddly, suggesting (to my way of reading at least) that the heart may be an inbuilt, intuitive, non-linguistic instrument for "seeing" godliness, for establishing our proper relationships with Atum, with the cosmos, with the things of the deeply inspirited world Atum created, and with ourselves. In other words, the heart may be both an organ of perception and a center of intelligence, neither of which are commonplace ways of thinking about it functionally in post-Enlightenment Western culture, except of course in that superficial way we talk about things that are "heartfelt" or advise people to "take heart."

In any case, I want to pivot on this figure—the heart—on my way toward a more appealing (to me if not to Hermes) post-Cartesian merger among the body's multiple intelligence centers, with the heart rather than the brain or Mind as the primary site for perception and understanding, one that replaces hieroglyphs with plants as the object of attention.

2.

Just by coincidence, right before I read *The Hermetica*, I had been reading Stephen Harrod Buhner's remarkable

book *The Secret Teachings of Plants: The Intelligence of the Heart in the Direct Perception of Nature*, which is basically a primer for establishing intimate, peer-to-peer relationships with plants in the natural world, relationships that in certain extraordinary cases, like Buhner for example, can result in a shamanistic ability to identify effective plant-based remedies for human illnesses. I am way too old to accomplish this latter proficiency, and actually prefer not to acquire it, for ethical and temperamental reasons. But the more general kinds of relationships he proposes are both familiar and appealing to me. In the context of his argument, then, the realm of plants is the analogous "text" that remains hidden from us, available only once we learn to "read" it properly. And Buhner offers a very specific recipe for something akin to Hermetic contemplation as the way to learn how to do that.

I have written elsewhere (in my poetry, and in my prose most fully in *This Fall: essays on loss and recovery*) about my lifetime of experience communing directly with earthly flora, especially trees, roughly in the way Buhner recommends, not as medicinal, but as equal partners in a dance of non-verbal communication and emotional resonance. My first memory of such an interaction was with a very large tree on my uncle's farm, when I was maybe 6 or so. Every time I walked past it on my way down to the creek to play I would feel a static electric charge in my head, literally. It was a little scary. I felt the tree was beckoning me closer but feared if I got too close I would simply be absorbed into its structure, losing my own identity. That experience affected me profoundly. About 35 years later I wrote a poem about this, comparing my younger self to Daphne, of Greek myth fame, whose father turns her into a laurel tree to escape

the rapacious pursuit of Apollo. At this later stage of my life, harassed and stressed out by the obligations and temptations of a profane professional culture, that outcome actually looked quite appealing to me, which is what the poem is about, my imagining myself turning into a tree. I'll include that poem as an appendix if you're interested. In the meantime, all this has settled into my nearly daily and very soothing routine of visiting my many friends in the sylvan spaces I walk through.

Though Buhner doesn't reference it, I've also read a good bit of the current research on the ways plants, especially trees, communicate and share resources with one another electro-chemically via the mycelial under-turf in which their roots are embedded and saturated. So that hidden part of the "teachings" of plants, the underground part, is not entirely "secret" to me either. I actually feel in some way the complex network of subterranean connections that relay information almost instantly through what has come to be called "the wood-wide web," such that in communing with one tree I am often communing with many. What interested me most though about Buhner's study, and changed my way of thinking about human intelligence in fundamental ways, is his argument—laid out in richly-researched detail in the first half of the book—on behalf of the heart as the primary indigenous intelligence center in human experience. This claim, which on first sight might seem much too New-Agey to have scientific merit, is advanced and supplemented with such a density of technical data from current neuroscientific research that it is redoubtably persuasive to me. All of that evidence about the neuronic nature of the heart shifted my perspective dramatically on where intelligence is centered in embodied human experience.

Buhner acknowledges the power of the brain, which Western culture in particular has valorized (via a longstanding mind/body separation, *a la* Descartes, for example) and then privileged as the executive (a sort of elaborate calculative system, *a la*, more recently, a computer) governing human cognition. But he sees it as an essentially amoral instrument that, left unchecked, establishes a dysfunctional level of control over the rest of the body's intelligence centers, derogating them thereby into simple mechanical devices to keep the brain alive and functional. He nods to current research that identifies the gut biome as a powerful engine in the perceptual and decision-making process. Primarily, though, he wants to make a case in this book for the heart as the central organ orchestrating the epistemological process, shifting the locus of attention out of the top-down-head and into this radially vibrant organ, and he devotes the first half of the book to a very sophisticated and granularly detailed compendium of recent research on the sensory processing and communicative capacities of the heart.

Buhner begins with an extended lesson on fractals, as they apply not just to material aspects of the natural world but to everyday bodily functions, including the beating heart. The continuous fractal variations in the activity of the heart as it responds to both internal and external stimuli can, of course, be read directly via blood pressure and heart rate. But his primary focus is on the electromagnetic field all human hearts generate, allowing them to "communicate" in quite intimate ways with other electro-magnetic fields, both internally (where he believes the heart not the brain merits executive control) and externally (where he believes

genuine cross-species communication is constantly ongoing, beneath our notice now because of culturally induced biases.) In the more remote past, and in current Indigenous cultures, this mode of heart-privileged knowing was/is he says, natural and commonplace:

> *The Greeks had a word for the heart's ability to perceive meaning from the world: aesthesis. . . Aesthesis denotes the moment in which a flow of life force, imbued with communications, moves from one living organism to another. The word literally means "to breathe in." . . . When we experience this sharing of soul essence, we have a direct experience that we are not alone in the world. . . Unlike the heart, with its connected empathic perceptions the brain has no inherent moral nature.* (118)

The heart then is our conduit for soul-awareness and -sharing, the seat for our empathic perceptions, our moral compass, and our most important instrument for communication with the outside world. This extraordinary power is not an esoteric one to be acquired by hard labor. It is inbuilt:

> *Living organisms, including people, exchange electromagnetic energy through contact between fields, and the electromagnetic energy carries information in much the same way radio transmitters and receivers carry music.* (108)

Simple as that. The problem in his view is that culture has over the long haul gradually restricted the bandwidth of our receptive capacity until we basically hear only one channel, which flows through the brain and not the heart. I have long felt, and have written

elsewhere about my belief, that the human body is arrayed with many, many antennae for receiving information both from human others—via deep listening—and from external objects—via deep attention. I enter just such a "listening" mode when I want to be sure I'm "hearing" and "seeing" what's there when a person or living thing is in front of me— and not the noise inside my own head, some inherited cliché, or a simulacrum of the original—in its moment of presence. As Buhner says:

> *We are built to experience [aesthesis], to be aware that each thing possesses a unique identity, its own particular eachness*. (121)

And:

> *When a person projects a heart-coherent field filled with caring, love and attention, living organisms respond to information in the field by becoming more responsive, open, affectionate, animated, and closely connected*. (109)

He calls this mode of connection "entraining," which happens when one field interacts with another until they match frequencies, the way, for example, generated sine waves can either cancel (when at odds) or amplify (when in concert) one another. You may have had a very common experience with this while lying with a child to help them sleep, matching breathing, or calming an anxious friend by the tone and pace of your voice.

> *We have an innate capacity to entrain ourselves, to establish a harmony of patterning, a rapport, with anything upon which our heart-attention is focused. . . As your connection is deepened . . . you absorb its*

> *meanings, its intelligence, and its particular point of view.* (159)

By this means, Buhner redeems sensation as a formative force in the meaning-making process. He says:

> *Sense instead of think. This is what the senses are meant to do. . . Our senses connect us to, interweave us with, the stream of informational energy that comes to us at every moment of every day that we live. . . kind of like taking a bath in colors, sounds and tastes . . .* (139)

Buhner conceptualizes this synesthetic sensation as not simply a receptive but also a meditative function, which he describes as an "acuity of perception," differentiating it from more familiar kinds of meditation:

> *Buddhists have long worked to teach people to still the chattering mind, understanding that this is an essential step. Some of those techniques, when inserted into the illusionary dualism separating spirit and matter, all too often create an antagonistic relationship with a part of us that is, and is meant to be, an ally. You cannot stop the linear mind, leaving nothing in its place.*
>
> *<u>It resents destructive approaches.</u>*
>
> *The work is simple. Do something else instead.(142) . . .*
>
> *As your body becomes more and more alive through the activation of the senses, sensing is what you do instead of thinking. . . Your consciousness begins to move out of the brain, leaving the analytic mind behind. You begin to*

> *find the world that our ancient ancestors knew so well.* (143)

The result of all of this is, in my view, a poetic way of "reading" the world around us (akin to Shelley's argument on behalf of the primacy of poetic experience in both the verbal and extra-verbal worlds we create as we inhabit them), one that doesn't have to be learned, simply revived. And, in Buhner's system, this can be accomplished by shifting the locus of knowledge-acquisition from the brain to the heart:

> *But when the heart is the primary organ of perception, imagination is something else. It is a kind of thinking that is done with the heart. . . It is a highly elegant form of seeing. When beginning this process of knowing, the first step is entering Nature and focusing your awareness on the external world—directing your perception through the senses.* (189)

The heart then is an instrument of imagination, thinking, and seeing, where all of those things happen simultaneously. And as he says, the first step is to focus not inward but outward. I've written elsewhere about a mode of meditation I use to move my locus of attention entirely outside myself, often quite remotely, as a means of relieving the anxiety of self-presence. I recently had a dream to this effect. I can't remember its context, but this is what I wrote down: "In order to get in" (to the kingdom of heaven, which is what I was thinking about, and will write more about in the next section), "you have to go out" (of yourself.) I think this is a succinct summary of at least the first step in Buhner's mode of "contemplation:" You need to go out to get in.

To achieve what he calls "direct perception" effectively, he goes on in the second half of the book to offer many suggestions:

> *You must remain as open as possible and let your sensing be shaped by the phenomenon itself. This requires tremendous flexibility in your internal world. . . [T]his kind of direct perception initiates an unavoidable encounter with your own personal history.* (230)

Direct perception takes some work (I found it to be quite exhausting when I entered that mode to teach) and involves some risk (the upheaval of self-discovery.) He says further:

> *You must have a drive to see with the transparent eye, to have no judgments about, desires for, or emotional aversion to the mode of representation that arises within you. This calls for tremendous personal awareness.* (230)

Buhner quotes both Emerson and Thoreau as advocates for this transparency of vision:

> *All mean egoism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball.* (Emerson) (231)

> *It is by obeying the suggestions of the higher light within you that you escape from yourself and, in transit, as it were to see with the unworn sides of your eye. . .* (Thoreau) (247)

Escaping our "mean egoism" to receive the wisdom of "the higher light" brings the sensory and the spiritual together under the aegis of this special sort of "vision."

What one apprehends and understands through this mode of seeing is that the natural universe is inspirited just as we are (another Emersonian idea) and intrinsically moral in its nature (reminiscent to me of C.S Pierce's assertion that the material universe is animated by a similarly moral kind of "love"). And its currency is truth:

> *But the morality that comes from engaging with the world is not a top-down morality. It is something else again, a living thing that comes from the world itself. . .*
>
> *The more we lie, are out of accord with the truth that is found in Nature, the less we are able to perceive of the depth dimension of Nature. The hidden face of Nature, thus, is an expression of its moral dimensions, which are as real as its physical dimensions.* (246-7)

One of the primary inhibiting factors to this process is language itself, when it is too closely allied with analytic thinking and alienated from the truth of "one's word:"

> *The verbal/intellectual/analytic mode of cognition is, by nature, amoral. It is also exceptionally shallow. . .*
>
> *The holistic/intuitive/depth mode of cognition is inherently multidimensional, deep and nonlinear. . .*
>
> *Breaking one's word creates a division between self and other, the contract that the word sealed rent asunder.* (248)

Buhner doesn't use "word" with a capital W, as both the Bible and Hermes do, that godly breath proffering both life and its inevitable ally time to the manifest universe.

But neither is he talking about "words" per se. His is an ethical imperative, one that makes language promissory, sacrosanct, a moral imperative, a matter of personal honor. I have never myself seen any value in words that were not meant to be kept, the commonplace state of affairs in Western, industrial, capitalistic systems. So I take his message in that regard fully to "heart." Language for him is not a transactional but a spiritual currency, and this, too, he extends far beyond the range of human linguistic systems:

> *Our language is a created form expressed out of the original nonverbal languages that human beings have always apprehended. It is a shadow, a reflection, a copy. Human language is only a special instance of language*. (256)

This sounds kind of Platonic, but the part of this passage that interests me is the foundation of language in the non- or pre-verbal states "that human beings have always apprehended." Buhner doesn't say this expressly, but implies that we have become so preoccupied with the ongoing static of verbal discourse as a vehicle for communication and commerce that we no longer "hear" any of the nonverbal languages which we are gifted to "speak" and receive, nor do we any longer have the capacity to overhear the many other natural languages that are being "spoken," via silent electromagnetic resonances, all around us all the time. One source Buhner quotes repeatedly in this regard is Goethe, who of course speaks eloquently for the Romantic epistemology I've alluded to already.

A big part of his project in this book seems to be toward reawakening this now-latent but naturally endowed ability to "listen" as a mode of learning:

> *As encountered meanings flow into us they change us, remake us. . . . Soul-making is something that happens in the world.* (260)

Socrates, in Plato's *Protagoras*, opens his questioning of young Hippocrates' interest in indenturing himself to that famous sophist by maintaining that, to one degree or another, one's soul is put at stake in any educational enterprise. We have in Western culture become inured to this way of seeing such dramatic stakes in pedagogical interactions. But there is a long cultural tradition for seeing the learning process as one of "soul-making." Socrates is merely calling on Hippocrates to take greater care in that regard.

One of the most salutary effects of this mode of listening and learning is to re-synthesize the body's various intelligence centers into a harmonious whole, which opens the possibility of "hearing" all the other chatter going on around us in the natural world as equivalent to ours:

> *Ultimately, the use of direct perception as a mode of being, as a normal way of cognition, begins to erase mind-body dualism. You begin to directly experience that there is no higher and lower, no up and no down, no better than and less than. No hierarchy at all. You begin to transcend anthropomorphism.* (265)

No hierarchy at all! At least to me, that state of awareness alone makes all the time and trouble invested in achieving it well-worth it, because:

> *[a]fter you have done the work, after that burst of understanding comes, you have a jewel visible only to others who have gone this way before you, a jewel of great cost. That jewel contains a deep truth given to you from the heart of the world, one intended to bring you into yourself. And as you understand these jewels, you weave them deep into your fabric. They literally become part of who you are. And so, in a sense, the map itself is woven into your structure at the deepest level of your being. Simply in being yourself now, you know the way.* (270, underline mine)

Indeed! Every word in that final sentence has value. Our culture is rife with "self-help" models that purport to transform us into something we are not yet, but might become, often with considerable effort and at a significant cost. The beauty of Buhner's approach is its simplicity. By opening outward toward the secret teachings of plants, you can be "yourself," fully awake, right "now" and instinctively "know the way." All for free.

What Buhner proffers does on the face of it seem like one effective strategy for "reading" meanings that aren't immediately legible, as in the case of plants, which I am quite certain communicate clearly and caringly (for the most part) with one another and whose electromagnetic signals we can receive if we tune our antennae finely enough toward them. Buhner has, of course, spent a lifetime honing his skills in this regard, a process that

takes at least many, many hours for each individual plant and many, many years to build up into a reservoir of reliable knowledge. He implies along the way that others either more gifted than he is, despite being trapped now in a heart-denial culture, or just closer to heart-based reception, as in Indigenous or pre-historic cultures, could do this much more intuitively and very quickly, becoming shamans at a much younger age. In my last book I make a very elaborate case for the powers of the brain to help us solve our problems indirectly via imagination and dreams. It never crossed my mind to assign these powers to the heart, though I'm inclined now to think that might be a good idea.

As Buhner's argument closes, he sounds to me an awful lot like Hermes at the conclusion of his teachings, with the focus shifted more toward Nature than toward Mind. That may seem like a very consequential change of venue for the perception of truth, but even Hermes presumes a material universe saturated in every way by Soul. And even Buhner includes most of the functions of what Hermes might call Mind in his heart-centric way of being in the world. The "secrets" at stake in these two systems may be quite different, but the ways of "reading" that disclose those secrets share many of the same features. They are easy to practice when you lend yourself to the truths they are designed to reveal. And once you do, the process of revelation is quite simple and natural. Without that lending, of course, there is little or no learning at all.

3.

The final text I'm turning to here to complete the circuit is one that may seem only tenuously connected to either

of the first two, but it is the one that got me thinking about this problem in the first place: I.e., how we can presume, or learn how, to read very simple-sounding wisdom texts that simultaneously claim to be readily available only to the few and intentionally withheld from the many.

The week before I started reading *The Hermetica*, the topic I had suggested for discussion in a weekly Zoom with my siblings, one that has puzzled and interested me ever since I was a kid, was what to make of Jesus' oft-repeated saying, pertaining to his parables: "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." What, I was asking, are "ears" that "hear" and how does one know whether one actually has them (and is not deluding oneself hypocritically) when listening to teachings of this sort? Clearly, most humans have ears capable of hearing, so why draw this distinction between hearing ears that hear and those that don't? I'll start with Jesus' pronouncement and see if I can tease out some keys to what it means to have hearing ears; and then, I hope, find a way back to Hermes and Buhner.

The expression about hearing ears appears in one form or another in each of the three Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke) after Jesus delivers the parable of the sown seeds, the one where the seeds fall on different kinds of ground—rocky, dry and well-trodden, thorny, fertile—and have quite different outcomes. A parable is of course an indirect way of teaching: Jesus renders the various images and doesn't go on to explain what each one means. So a listener has to think a bit about how each of those outcomes translates to one's spiritual enterprise. That takes some "contemplative" work, but is not, it seems to me, an overly daunting task for

anyone interested in the message at hand. Surprisingly (to me and I think to Jesus), when he and the disciples get back to home base, they ask him why he talks in such a roundabout way and what this specific parable means.

In Matthew's and Luke's versions Jesus seems quite sanguine, simply explaining the parable's parts in detail. In Mark's version, however, the first of the Synoptic Gospels and the template for much of what made its way into Matthew and Luke (so, to me, more authoritative), Jesus seems irritated: As he concludes his talk to the crowds he says, cryptically: "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." Then:

> *When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that,*
>
> *'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,*
> *and ever hearing but never understanding;*
> *otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"*
>
> *Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word.Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among*

> *thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."* (Mark 4:10-20)

Jesus makes two points here: First, he had at least presumed (though their obtuseness now may give him pause) that the disciples were already properly initiated, had been "given" the "secret of the kingdom of God." The passage from Isaiah draws a distinction between seeing and hearing and perceiving and understanding, and Jesus seems a bit frustrated that the disciples find it so difficult to "perceive" and "understand" his quite simple stories. The odd part is that both Isaiah and Jesus indicate that what they say is designed to be mysteriously impenetrable to those among their listeners who are "on the outside," which would, I imagine, be a good portion of those who come out to hear them. It's unclear to me if Isaiah means in his last phrase that the word of God is intended to preclude most listeners or that most listeners choose not to "hear" it because then they would have to "turn to be forgiven," implying they are ready and willing both to hold themselves accountable for their transgressions and to change their ways, neither easy or common human inclinations. I tend to think the latter, perhaps the most formidable impediment to true spiritual growth. But it could go either way. Likewise, in Mark's version at least, with Jesus it's a conundrum: Are the parables designed more to reveal or primarily to hide the pathway to godliness?

Jesus uses the same expression about ears to hear later in Mark, this time adding a warning:

> *"If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear."*
>
> *"Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."* (Mark 4:23-25)

There are of course many difficult kinds of discourse that one can literally "hear" without understanding. Scholarly and academic discourses are good examples. Unless you have been indoctrinated with the "code" you are likely to have difficulty understanding what a specific bit of such discourse is trying to accomplish, why it's important, or even what it's about. Aristotle includes more specific examples, like foreign terms and, famously, metaphoric expressions, that take some kind of translational work to understand. Jesus' parables qualify under the latter category, though they are not especially cryptic or laden with hidden meanings. The code is a simple one: the parables have embedded morals quite readily available with a bit of "contemplation," certainly to anyone who has already entered the kingdom of God, like the disciples. And they are similarly readily available to anyone who wants to enter that kingdom. As Hermes says:

> *Simply wishing and hoping to know [Atum]*
> *is a road that leads straight to Goodness.*
> *It is an easy road to travel.*
> *Everywhere Atum will come to meet you.*
> *Look and he appears . . .* (110)

I think Jesus is saying the same thing about the kingdom of heaven, which is within us all, waiting to be awakened. I have no idea what percentage of the crowds gathered to hear Jesus he would consider qualified to hear and what percentage he intends to hide his message from. The fact that even his own disciples seem to be in the latter category leads to his obvious frustration, in Mark's version at least. As to the second point Jesus makes, pertaining to their current qualification to do his work, I hear him saying something like: "Hey, get with the program, guys. I'm counting on you to carry on this work, so step up. This stuff is not rocket science." I like Mark's Jesus quite a lot. He has many human qualities, impatience among them. I can relate to all of that.

In Matthew's version, when the disciples ask why he speaks in parables, Jesus only does the first thing I mention: suggest the differences between insiders and outsiders when it comes to the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" without the irritation or subsequent chastisement, though he repeats the same giving/taking equation:

> *The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"*
>
> *He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. This is why I speak to them in parables.* (Matthew 13:10-13)

This may seem patently unfair: Those already there get even more; those who are not lose more and more, a seemingly counterproductive approach to conversion. But it is what Jesus says. He then goes on to quote Isaiah more extensively:

> *Though seeing, they do not see;*
> *though hearing, they do not hear or understand.*
> *In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:*
>
> *"You will be ever hearing but never understanding;*
> *you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.*
> *For this people's heart has become calloused;*
> *they hardly hear with their ears,*
> *and they have closed their eyes.*
> *Otherwise they might see with their eyes,*
> *hear with their ears,*
> *understand with their hearts*
> *and turn, and I would heal them."* (Matthew 13:13-15, Isaiah 6:9-10)

Isaiah says all of this in the aftermath of a direct encounter with God, promising to be his messenger. The message he is instructed to convey is very strange, though. God seems to want Isaiah to obstruct the capacity of his people to understand "with their hearts" so that they might "turn" to be healed in the same way Jesus does:

> *Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,*

"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" . . .

Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?" And he answered: "Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged,until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.

And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land." (Isaiah 6:6-15)

Isaiah is instructed to do his work not to save lost souls but to assure that they will not hear and will be ruined, an odd charge for a putatively loving God to give to his spokesperson.

Similarly, Jesus concludes in Matthew by reinforcing this sense that the meaning of the seemingly simple messages carried in his parables will be evident only to those already within, or on the way to, the kingdom of heaven, and fully—even intentionally—hidden from those who are not, dooming them in much the same way. The disciples are supposed to have ears to hear (though they have difficulty doing it) and will thereby be saved:

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Matthew 13:16)

Further on in Matthew's extended compendium of Jesus' parables, he tells the crowd two brief ones in which the kingdom of heaven is compared to a mustard seed that grows into a tree and yeast that leavens 60 pounds of dough. Matthew concludes that section this way:

> *Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:*
>
> > *"I will open my mouth in parables,*
> >
> > *I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world."* (Matthew 13:34-35)

There is an odd doubleness to the hiddenness at play here: "things hidden since the creation of the world" are uttered in parables that hide their meanings. Again, later, the disciples ask Jesus to explain these two parables, which he does in some detail, reiterating "Whoever has ears, let them hear" (Matthew 13:43) as a cautionary mandate. He must at this point be wondering whether they will ever come around!

The version of the sown-seeds parable that Luke narrates is very similar to Matthew's in its temperance, though briefer, highlighting ever more obviously via Isaiah the intentional hiddenness of Jesus' message. He concludes his sermon to the crowd with the same "whoever has ears to hear" pronouncement. Later,

> *[h]is disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of*

> *God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that,*
>
> > *'though seeing, they may not see;*
> > *though hearing, they may not understand'"* (Luke 8:9-10)

Again, the message being delivered indirectly via the parables, including the passage from Isaiah, is not simply hidden, it is being intentionally withheld from those who, one might say, need most to hear it.

So, I think it's safe to say that, like Hermes' teachings and Buhner's plants, the parables house hidden secrets. And in this context, I'm not even persuaded that the simple "translations" Jesus offers for each of the outcomes of the sower's work are sufficient to reveal them, which becomes abundantly clear when one turns to the "lost gospels" (as I do later here in "When You Make the Two One"), where this secrecy business is taken to a whole other level. The kingdom of heaven is, to my way of reading Jesus' message, an astonishing place, one that resides both in the individual mind of one who truly sees and hears, and in the godly universe with which that mind comes into confluence. It is instantly available to anyone who uses those sensory gifts, more a waking up than a course of study. And it is impossible to enter it by the everyday rational, logical, language-based media of the culture at large. How to get there is another matter altogether.

Later in Luke (Luke14), after a series of even more complex and generally harsher parables (the exalted wedding guest who is humbled; the denial of the banquet feast to all who had been invited; the unfinished

tower; the need to give up everything to be a disciple; the salt that loses its taste), Jesus again repeats: "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." Here, the message seems to be that unless one is willing, as a prelude, to give up all the cultural accoutrements that make life comfortable—family, status, money, security, etc.—those ears simply won't become activated to hear, no matter how hard one tries. If you look at those preconditions literally, very few, then or now, would qualify. I'm inclined to think that freeing oneself from those cultural and social constraints might be possible in a figurative way, via a peaceful and loving heart, though I have no evidence to support that, aside from my "gut" feeling.

The relationship between Jesus and the Gnosticism of his time is, I know, a vexed question both historically and theologically. That strain of Christianity flourished from Jesus' time until the second and third centuries, when the Church denounced it as heretical and burned all of the gnostic writings they could lay their hands on. It really wasn't until the Nag Hammadi cache was unearthed in Egypt in 1945 that a gnostic version of Jesus' teachings emerged into view, via what came to be called "the lost gospels." I'm less interested here in the specific beliefs of the gnostics, as they pertain to the divinity of Jesus, for example, than I am in the general epistemic that underlies the movement: the valorization of personal spiritual knowledge over orthodox teachings, longstanding traditions and institutional authority.

The Greek term *gnosis* refers simply to knowledge acquired via direct personal perception, akin to the kind Buhner recommends. The Jesus I hear in the Gospels—not simply in the parables, which he never explains to

the crowds, but also in his assertion that they are at least as much a way to hide true knowledge as to reveal it—sounds gnostic to me. And it appeals quite a bit to my own anti-authoritarian temperament when it comes to spiritual practice. I know there are longstanding and quite elaborate authorized interpretations of the various scriptures I read and comment on, here and elsewhere. Many of my own interpretations of those scriptures are clearly (though unintentionally) heretical in a gnostic way. One of my touchstones for personal validation in this regard is, in fact, precisely the way Jesus uses this figure of "ears that hear." I prefer to hear with mine rather than defer to others', and I believe Jesus warrants that self-faith and self-reliance, even mandates it, with that very expression.

But why I wondered when I was a kid sitting in church, and still do, would someone on a mission of conversion preach this way, so that only the already-initiated, or perhaps those already committed to the path toward that end, will hear? It seems almost pointless. It's in the anomaly of the disciples' bafflement with Jesus' method, and his efforts to help them learn, that all of this is called to the fore, taking me back where I started this circuit, to the same problem with Hermes' secret teachings, their seeming lucidity and their pronounced opacity to those without "ears to hear." Likewise with Buhner's plants' secret teachings, instantly and immediately available to anyone with "ears to hear," and unattainable to those without them. I have no solution to that conundrum. Buhner does seem to offer a heart-based path toward a method of contemplation that might, at least in its outlines, also be satisfactory to Hermes. And I like it. As to Jesus, well, I've read and reread the New Testament Gospels as well as some of

the heretical Gnostic Gospels with considered attention. Anyone who claims his teachings are easily accessible and practicable in a culture like ours, rife with almost-cultlike religious authoritarianism and the excesses of capitalism, can't possibly be reading the texts the same way I am. Jesus' teachings are secret for a reason, and they have remained so, in my view, almost from the outset.

Even Paul, who administered the development of the Church in its earliest days, seems to me to mis-hear what Jesus might have preferred the early community to look like, specifically in his choice of the crucifixion rather than the resurrection as the primary symbol for the Church. Jesus says expressly in John's Gospel: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). And he seems much more often to focus on light and the life of redemption than to glorify suffering and death. Paul also attempts to marginalize the role and status of women in Church affairs (Jesus didn't do that). And he declares a preference for faith over works as the path to the kingdom of heaven (a binary opposition Jesus never indulges.) Paul was a Pharisee persecuting early Christians with a vengeance before his conversion on the road to Damascus. The foundational character that supported all of that misguided righteousness in some ways seems (to me) simply to translate over to his new enterprise. He believes, and says, he has been endowed with direct revelations from Jesus about his secret wisdom, which gives him a special authority in asserting his beliefs. His strong will and authoritarian bent, in my view, make it difficult for his ears to hear clearly some of Jesus' most basic secrets.

All of this was amplified exponentially in the fourth century CE, when the very diverse and still relatively tolerant (though intensively persecuted) Christian community was co-opted by the bellicose and ultra-colonizing Roman Empire, under Constantine, who used his personal conversion to transform Christianity into a State religion, infusing it quickly with an authoritarian orthodoxy. This trend reached its apogee in the 15th century with the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition, a reign of terror that was, in my view, much easier to prosecute under the visage of a bloody corpse on a cross than it would have been with an enlightened Jesus rising. The effect of this rampant institutionalization was to promote conformity, via violence when necessary, as in the genocide carried out in the Americas under the sign of the cross, by retracting more and more authority from the laity and concentrating it more and more in an elaborate and arcane male-dominated clerical hierarchy, which purported to provide their congregations with institutionally sanctioned "ears to hear," so they wouldn't be tempted (or sometimes even allowed) to use their own. I don't think any of the three authors I've discussed here would consider this a salutary solution to the problem of the different kinds of "salvation" at stake as they attempt to teach the deep secrets at the hearts of their various transformative enterprises.

4.

So far, this essay merely documents what these three quite diverse sources say about how to wake up to some version of the truth and the light. I feel compelled now to see if I can come up with some actual "takeaways" that pertain at least to how they invite me to reflect on

my life in the temporal world, and perhaps to entice readers of these texts to do likewise. I use the expression "ears to hear" quite often in the essays and poems I now write, things that find very few readers when I send them out, sometimes just two or three, who then write to me to explain what their ears heard and how it impacted them. Kind of like Jesus' parables, Hermes' teachings, and Buhner's plants: Unless you're willing to get beyond the façade of the words, take it to "the next level" as it were, via some mode of contemplation that promotes personal change, well, it's just a lot of fancy footwork, a dance that leads nowhere.

So let me get to it and see where this goes. I'll start with the scene where I first began to wonder about this mystery, where this essay is rooted, way back when I was just a kid sitting in church (which was, in my Irish Catholic heritage, more like a home away from home than a Sunday obligation) thinking about what Jesus might mean by "ears that hear." I can actually recall looking around at the spiffed-up Sunday crowds thinking: "I bet most of these people listening now, if they even think about this at all, believe they are among those endowed with proper ears to hear, no problem, no need to worry, the kingdom of heaven already at hand for them." And I recall focusing on a few specific people (I can still visualize them with immediacy) sitting there smiling, smug and self-satisfied, whom I knew from experience were what I thought of back then as "hypocrites." Not evil, not terrible, just those for whom weekdays were self-serving "business as usual" interims punctuated by dress-up Sundays at church, where they accepted whatever interpretations of Jesus' message the priest of the day pronounced without a moment's thought of their own about how it might be inviting

them to reflect on, in order to change, their daily practices. They were, in my view back then, exactly the sort of listeners that Jesus would be precluding from his secrets by using parables as a medium.

I took to "heart" what I believed to be Jesus' message: that yes, the kingdom of heaven was attainable in this life, in this world, but to find it—right now, right here, "at hand," as an integral part of my own experience—some significant work was in order. It was by no means simply a Sunday-sermon sit-down. It was an everyday-always thing, hard or easy, a resolute commitment with rewards of incomparable value. Have I lived up to the clear prerequisites that Jesus details in his sermons—most fully accounted in Matthew? No. I've made money, had jobs, raised a family, all of which require, sooner or later, keeping this "kingdom of heaven" business at least somewhat in check, on the back burner as it were. I try to persuade myself that Jesus, who had to endure being human, would understand why, and how in-check and back-burner are not the same thing as entirely out of mind.

As I said above, one of the things I really like about the Jesus my ears hear in the gospels is his humanness: he gets irritated, sometimes angry, even indulging an occasional bit of seething rage against the hypocrisy of the Jewish elite of his time, their greed, shallowness, pettiness, intolerance of "others." Correspondingly, I also believe that Jesus must have had a great sense of humor, knew exactly what his own excesses were and used them intentionally, dramatically as it were. This side of his personality can only be intuited from the Synoptic Gospels, much on the serious side. In some of the lost gospels on the other hand it is front and center

in the most entertaining ways. I think it would have been a blast to be around him, to listen to him teach and to learn what he was trying to get at. I may well have been—may well be still—as obtuse as his disciples are (also kind of humorous to me) in actually getting the point. But like them I would have kept trying, as, again, I still do.

My takeaway in this instance is a simple one: You need to learn to listen with both your heart and your mind to fathom the mysteries of his messages, to keep them near at hand on a day-to-day basis, to learn how to love the godly world and its people, including most importantly yourself, as truly and persistently as you can. That to me is the kingdom of heaven: a peaceful head and a loving heart working in concert to allow the sown seed to take root and grow.

. . .

As to Buhner, I think I've at least implied my takeaways in my treatment of his book: I know in every fiber of my being that the flora (and fauna, though less often my jam) of this beautiful world are animated by a spirit, most often a good one, that I can interact with and share when I'm willing to invest the time and attention this sort of "listening" requires. And if I do, they will yield their secrets. Toward that end, I walk in the woods almost every day, taking the same walks over and over, listening with an open heart. I am especially attuned to trees, who, after some time, commune with me in a way beyond words that is hard to describe. Sooner or later, in Buhner's terms, we entrain. I rarely take one-off walks to dramatic sylvan settings. For me, it generally takes many, many walks in one place to get to know the local

arboreal culture and specific trees personally. Some come forward eagerly—the alders in the western forests and the poplars in the eastern forests are, at least for me, among them. I actually become quite light-hearted when I encounter them in numbers. There is one of each of these species—an alder here, a poplar back there—that I feel quite close to, even affectionate toward. I can picture each one of them clearly right now as I write this. I don't know if that feeling is reciprocated, but I believe it is recognized and appreciated, for which I am grateful.

Other species vary in their openness, a few withhold their welcome for a long time. Some Douglas firs out here and some oaks back in Boyce Park in Pittsburgh, where all of this intermingling began, are among the latter. In one of my favorite haunts in Olympia—Woodard Bay—I felt right from the outset that the old-growth Douglas firs deeply distrusted me, wished I would go away. One day, a couple of months ago, as I entered the forest at a point where a few dozen of these titans stand guard, with one in particular overwhelmingly large, the "king" of the group I'd say, surrounded and protected by sort of bulwark of downed trees, I suddenly felt that resistance evaporate. I was welcome. I calculated that it was about my 500th walk in this setting, which is how long it took for them to trust that I was not trouble. A friend asked whether this forest had been clear-cut at some time, which it was, except for a few patches of now hundreds-of-years-old firs. These survivors, I realized, had reason to be suspicious. The effect of this welcome was a bit uncomfortable, literally took my breath away, which it still does when I stop to attend to one of these great trees. Like it is almost too much for my body to absorb. I move on

quickly. I take that to be indicative of the temperament of this species in this specific place, stern and reserved, given their shared history. By contrast, the firs in Watershed Park, which was less-ravaged by logging in the 19th and 20th centuries, tend to be more mellow, more immediately receptive to my presence.

At the far end of my Woodard Bay walk is a humongous, very aged tree, a big-leaf maple, at least 8 feet wide at the base, not far off the path. It is the only old-growth big-leaf that I see on this walk. I have thought of it right from the outset as a sort of regal presence, overseeing and anchoring the whole space with its patience and intelligence. I never felt comfortable, even allowed, to approach it too closely, like some force field impeded me. About a year ago I was walking by, giving it its space, and I suddenly felt the opposite, an invitation to approach, which I did. When I touched it, my whole system, body and mind, settled, becoming entrained with its fundamentally peaceful heart. It was quite moving. It took almost as long for this tree to trust my presence as it did the firs, maybe for the same reason.

I think you can tell from all of this that the "secret teachings" Buhner believes plants make available to ears that hear seem quite normal to me. I'm not just sympathetic to his message, I am already persuaded, based on my own first-hand experiences, of its general veracity. The one unexpected, even transformative, takeaway for me was his argument (founded on reams of verifiable data from reputable sources) on behalf of a heart-centric intelligence as a portal to equitable (mutually electromagnetic) relations with things in the natural world. Western industrial cultures have chosen

to believe that human dominance over "nature" is inbuilt to (the Judeo-Christian) God's creation (often using cherry-picked Biblical passages to warrant the devastation that capitalistic enterprises inflict on other living things.) In the context of Buhner's system, that is an almost insane misreading of that creation (as it is of the Bible), one that can't even begin to imagine, let alone fathom, the secret teachings so immediately at hand.

The more extreme part of Buhner's program—becoming a shamanic healer—is, as I said, of little interest to me. He documents how much time and energy it takes to master the secrets of even one plant (his primary example is skunk cabbage, a favorite plant of mine), many, many hours over many weeks and months; and the cost to him, physically and emotionally, of implementing that knowledge for healing purposes. I am, first of all, too old to begin such a journey. And second of all, I am simply not willing to risk all I know I would have to, physically and emotionally, both to acquire that knowledge and, even more so, put it into practice. So it is the more theoretical first half of his book whose secrets I have "ears to hear." I listened intently to the second half and have quoted from it amply. I'm just unwilling to translate it into practice.

. . .

This unwillingness to translate listening into practice seems a fair way to start talking about my takeaway from *The Hermetica*. I like the general framework of its ontology—reminding me in many ways of ancient Eastern wisdom texts and some of the more soothing parts of the Old Testament, even parts of the New

Testament, especially John's transcendent Gospel. And I like the sort of contemplation Hermes recommends. Except for its intended outcome. I am simply not amenable to any philosophical system premised on a severe mind/body schism, most especially one, as in this case, that seeks to abnegate embodiment entirely. I'm glad I found and read the text, in part because it reminded me of the central conundrum about understanding mysteries that is the theme of this essay, which then impelled me to write it, which was enjoyable. *The Hermetica* is rich with insight and wisdom, though I suspect my unwillingness to go whole-hog with Hermes' program makes many of his secrets unhearable for me.

My overall point in this project is a simple one: All kinds of wisdom texts and living things are cloaking secrets of great consequence. They hold those secrets close for the same reason you and I do: so they won't be misunderstood by the many kinds of underestimation that careless, even presumptuous inattention induces. Their secrets can be enticed into the light with a "reading" practice that is open, tolerant, inquisitive, curious, akin to the sort of intense listening we engage in, at least from time to time, with loved ones, not merely to hear their words, but to receive the whole electromagnetic spectrum of their embodied presences, our hearts and ears momentarily in tune. When we do that, i.e., array all our instruments for reception in their direction, those texts and things will feel like loved ones, too, and they will yield at least some of their secrets to us generously, with grace and ease. And our ears will wake up enough to hear them.

Appendix

For Daphne: On the Mornings After

I

She told me how in her day
it happened matter of factly,
some girl on her way, say,
to the well, stopped in her tracks
legs stiff as tree stumps,
feet rooted to the ground;
and from fingertips clutching
into a cloudless, blue sky,
thousands of leaves puffed
from their buds at once.

The news spread fast:
proud parents announcing it,
a coming out of sorts;
brothers and sisters amazed
at the luck of such a great story
to tell to their friends at school;
her boyfriend, well, at a loss,
a little miffed, missing her.
Later, all the celebrating done,
everyone else home and asleep,
he'd hold her in his arms all night,
promise never to marry.

II

I couldn't have been more than
six or so when I first heard you
murmuring from the old elm
I had to walk past on my way
to the creek to play.
For years I steered clear,
trying not to listen.
Then one morning, my mind
too much abuzz with wonder
to stay away, I clung to the trunk
hoping to seep like a dark stain
into the clean wood beneath.
That night your words
turned into flocks of birds
swarming wildly by moonlight
across savannas of empty sky.

III

Last week, on my way to work,
the hollow of my head filling up,
as usual, with a cloudless,
blue sky, two birds circling
without a place to settle,
my legs just suddenly stiffened;
tendrils descended from
my feet, holding me hard
to the earth; my arms,
flung up to steady myself,
locked upward, hands cupped
open like empty nests.

Clouds of doubts massed up,
passing in fast-forward,
rationales I ransacked
in my panic for an answer:
the inevitable and graceless
changes of age? the grappling
fingers of someone else's past?
death's staccato laughter?
Then the birds settled
and I heard again your words.

IV

I notice it now mostly mornings:
a little stiffness in my hips,
that ringing in my ears.
All day the birds busy themselves
with nesting. By night
they settle down to rest.
I hear only the ceaseless music
of their voices, or mine, singing
of loves lost and then recovered,
ever the same song, growing
simpler and more clear,
nearer to the light into which,
we are always rising up or settling,
beyond which there is nothing more now
either one of us needs to say.

The Time Has Come . . .

"All hope is gone if you don't act on the words of a fool."

Barry Gibb

1.

May 8, 2023

It was a gorgeous morning—temperature in the 50s, bright sun, blue sky, fluffy clouds, no wind—the kind of perfect spring day that should have begun arriving here a month ago, but didn't, given the persistently cool weather that got entrenched late last year and never relented. As is my custom, on the best days I walk at my best place, Woodard Bay. So I headed off with no particular expectations, just a cheerful frame of mind. I had one little "job" to do there. A few weeks ago I decided to put together a glass-jar terrarium for my friend Yan. I had purchased the central decorative item during the winter, a tiny couple standing together in front of a tiny house, a boat floating by, inside a bake-a-lite-type clamshell. It just seemed sweet to me and reminded me of her. I figured I needed some natural materials to provide its setting, so one day out at Woodard Bay I collected a couple of moss-draped sticks from the ground and a beautiful, black, lichen-coated rock about the size of a softball. One of my cardinal woods-walking rules is never take anything out that I didn't bring in. I debated whether to break that rule for this rock (the little sticks, which were detritus on the ground seemed less problematic in that regard.) But the

rock was, I thought, perfect for my purposes, and was, I "reasoned" (always a bad sign), headed toward a noble fate, so I took it. Only to discover after I got home that it was too large to serve its purpose in the jar I had bought. I put it in a safe place in the yard and promised (myself) to put it back where I found it "someday." Well, today was that day.

My walk from the lot to the water, about a mile down a wide path, was just delightful. I passed by some workmen clearing out the invasive wild raspberry plants—those tall-stalked, many-barbed interlopers that weave together into dense thickets on disturbed ground—that have taken hold on one of the hillsides, the kind I used to battle every summer at the back fringes of the yard at the last house we owned in Pittsburgh. They grow like crazy and are very tenacious. Even pulling them up seems not to deter them. In any case, I had a brief encounter with one of the men who was, like me, very cheerful even in the face of his onerous task. As I approached the point where Woodard Bay and Henderson Inlet meet (where I had found the rock) a family of geese waddled out of the weeds, mother, father and five goslings barely able to walk they were so new. I spent some time watching and photographing them as they settled down near the water's edge to eat, the goslings gobbling down little seeds of something at a breakneck pace. Then I wandered up toward Woodard Bay to return the rock as near to the place I found it as I could calculate. Job done.

I did a couple of other things that are always on my itinerary when I walk out there, too complicated and personal to explain here. As I headed back on the

smaller path up through the woods I felt relaxed and happy. As soon as I entered the forest itself, all of that amplified considerably. Every walk in this place is emotionally meaningful to me in some way: soothing, restorative, illuminating, relaxing, thought-provoking, etc. Every now and then, though, one of them is literally ecstatic, in the etymological sense of that word: I am released from "myself" and enter into a deep sense of communion with everything around me. There are no boundaries between and among us any longer. It is a wonderfully liberating feeling. The phrase that kept repeating in my head today was "I love you," and I couldn't tell whether it was coming from the inside-out toward the forest or outside-in toward me. They were in fact exactly the same thing. This state of mind lasted at its highest level of intensity for about fifteen minutes, then gradually settled into a more "normal" kind of grateful peace of mind.

This has otherwise been a relatively volatile week for me, in my spirit. Not unpleasantly so; productively, I'd say. It all started last week when I received from my sister-in-law a little book of brief spiritual mediations that were meant to be read and contemplated at a one-a-day pace. It's not a book I likely would have bought for myself, and I'm quite an impatient reader, but she is the only person I know whom I consider to be saintly, so I thought I would follow the book's directives and give it a try. Each night for the last 4 nights I've read one of the meditations, thought about it for a minute or two, then asked my brain/heart to dream me up something pertinent to its theme. Each of those nights I've had a series of dreams that were, on the face of it (though not upsettingly) darkly turbulent, none of which was obviously, individually considered, connected to the

theme of the day. But when I woke up in the morning, somehow all of that action got boiled down to a simple insight: the first night about both the rarity and the importance of unconditional love, which is a way to create a bit of heaven on earth no matter how hellish the actual earth is; the second night about the inevitably murderous trajectory of unrelenting anger, which we witness daily in the news now; the third about the insidious connection between externally instilled fear and xenophobic hatred, which is our current political climate in a nutshell. Last night's reading had to do with hope. I didn't wake with a clear takeaway that I recall, but I think you can tell from the sort of walk I had that hope was in the air for me today.

The only dream I'll document here is the first one I allude to above, about unconditional love. It was quite complex and writing about it may help me to sort out some of its implications. The scene opens in a large room with many people milling about, not particularly purposively, just there. I appear to be of high school age and the only person I recognize is my high school best friend, with whom I am talking. I'm there with my girlfriend, standing beside me, whom I don't recognize. I just know she's my girlfriend. Out of the blue my friend starts picking at my hair, saying there is one place on the side where it was not properly cut and I should do something about that. I thought this was weird, but that's all, until, out of the corner of my eye, I saw my girlfriend really getting off on this criticism, as if it somehow validated, from his position of authority as my best friend, the various "faults" she saw in me and wanted corrected. In an instant, my thought process went from recognizing this unpleasant aspect of our relationship, to the sense that she apparently wanted me

to become more like my friend, to the deeper sense that what she actually wanted was to be with him instead of me, but couldn't because he was already taken. So her mission was to settle for second fiddle and try her best to cajole me toward a semblance of her real desire, which was him.

I became quite upset, said something (I don't remember what) and left the room in rush. At one point, I turned around to see if she would come after me, an index of genuine care, but she didn't. So I kept going. Outside the room, I began walking up a very steep hill, crowded with people, feeling vaguely alienated from them, gradually calming down, growing slowly older as I walked. Along the way I thought about how and why most of us fall in love, often unhappily so, driven by a hidden matrix of very specific desirable qualities and features, some arising from family dynamics, some from the cultural stereotypes in which we are saturated before we even learn to talk. There are probably some common features among gender-specific templates. But in the end, everyone seems to be unique in terms of exactly what most attracts or repels them. And those tendencies resist mightily any effort toward conscious control or intervention, like malware installed deep into our OS with instructions impossible to overwrite, leading us along robotically, a kind of blind somnambulism. I soon realized (duh!) that what my girlfriend was doing to me, which I didn't like, I was likely also doing to her: trying to pound a not-quite-round peg into a perfectly round hole. And that unless I could make some headway on becoming more conscious of the hidden "code" driving this process, learning somehow to resist its most dysfunctional effects, I was never likely to find true love with her or anyone.

Falling in love is such a mysterious and overwhelming force, one's whole system producing batches of chemicals that are, I assume, super-addictive, leading at one end of the spectrum to great happiness, at the other to broken hearts, relentless stalking, even murder, this latter common enough for us to have a special legal category to explain and sometimes forgive that type of homicide: *crime passionnel*, from the French, of course. The problem, I thought, in keeping with what I was writing about lately in "Teaching Secrets," is that "love" of this sort is premised more on what we want the other to be, driven by that unconscious inner matrix, than on who the other is, right here and now. Or, even worse, on who we are, right here and now! Interestingly, as I note in that essay, both Stephen Harrod Buhner, a contemporary biologist, and Jesus, that ancient, enigmatic teacher, argue that you can't ever get to the truth of anything, from plants to parables, without ears to hear and open eyes. We may be looking and listening, they say, but that doesn't mean we're seeing and understanding.

I was sure the girlfriend I left at the bottom of the hill lacked such ears and eyes for me. Hers were filled beforehand with what she really wanted and couldn't have. And I was pretty sure I must be doing likewise, deaf and blind both to her true nature and to my own deficits, via the conventional kinds of denial that acculturation provides us to sidestep just such potentially self-illuminating moments. Mutual denialism: thus all the friction that tends to characterize romantic relationships, including ours. How could it be otherwise when two people are pounding eccentric pegs into pre-formed symmetrical holes? Genuine love, I thought, whether of the "falling" variety or not, is not supposed

to be like that, should be intentional, willed, a choice, whether made in a few seconds or over many years, one guided by a firm commitment not just to endure the inevitable conflicts and difficulties, but to always negotiate a way forward toward mutually collaborative fulfilment. That may sound hard, and it is, but it's much easier than the alternative, just to pick the one available that is closest to the template and then relentlessly pound him or her into a hole that doesn't match. And when that doesn't work, do it again. And again. Or, even worse, to find exactly the right fit for your matrix and he/she turns out to be just as toxic, dysfunctional, and abusive as the map that led you to them. Either way is mutual misery not mutual trust, care or love. I came to this conclusion in the dream about halfway up the hill, by this time in my 30s, too late I knew to avoid some pretty serious bad vibes along the way. But not too late to change.

I thought a lot of other things as I walked further up the hill, getting older and older as I went, but I'll skip all the intermediary steps and get to the point I finally arrived at: If you're lucky enough to find a companionable soul to spend time with down here, and you two fall mutually in love, don't make it a one-and-done, as if that is enough to always carry the day. People change, things change, sometimes dramatically over time. And each one of those changes warrants a new falling in love. So, I told myself, no matter how secure I might feel, I should continue to listen and see, note what's different (or just come to a deeper understanding of what's there) and fall in love again. And then again, as many times as I can, for the rest of our time together if possible. This way of falling in love is less like the lizard brain flooding the body once with endorphins, fixing time and expectations

forever in that moment, and more like waking up to a uniquely bright and beautiful day, like today is here, over and over and over, the endorphins coming from the outside in.

When I reached the top of the hill I entered another room where I was alone and now at my current age. I realized I had walked through a lifetime in search of someone who would see me as I am—as opposed to what they wanted me to become—approvingly. A genuine recognition. Not one that would always stay exactly the same, a boring and pointless fate, but would update at every stage, even every moment, along the way, a collaborative effort toward positive change, which is my current addiction. I honestly cannot imagine how anyone can live inside a brain that doesn't crave change, and the knowledge that promotes and precipitates it. Octavia Butler says in *The Parable of the Sower* that "[a]ll that you touch you Change. All that you Change Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change." And then, quite astonishingly, "God is Change." The inspirational breath of the universe that, according to doctrine, always was, always is, always will be, the definition of constancy, is in her view also the definition of change. In my dream, I named that godly state of mind "true love," the ideal form of changeful constancy.

I was quite sure, in the dream at least, that what I imagined was possible in this life, rare maybe, more a matter of luck than effort, perhaps, at least in the opening moments, that first fateful falling, but possible. I thought further, looking back on the "life" I passed walking up the hill, that even if I had not been lucky enough to find that kind of love in an undiluted form, I

could and should learn how to be and do that for myself, which does not require luck but work. Only then would I be qualified to offer it to anyone else who crossed my path, upfront, free, my taking all the time in the world to turn looking and listening into seeing and understanding for whoever was right in front of me, approvingly, "faults" and all, whether they wanted to be with me in a romantic way or not, more a way "swiping right" over and over for the same person than "swiping left" over and over for an endless series of forgettable faces.

Finally, kind of wistfully, I hoped that if this bliss was never reciprocated, and if there is somewhere I end up after this life where I remain "me," that aura of unconditional love would engulf me and everyone else who is there with me. I never made it back to the original scene, as a high schooler, with my girlfriend and best friend. It was as if that whole world had vanished, and for the best. Maybe they got it on after I left, finding long-term happiness together! That would be cool. But I knew I was now better equipped to go back down the hill to start again.

I call attention to all of this (at much greater length than I had planned!) in the context of this essay for a very practical reason. I've been thinking a lot lately about the "kingdom of heaven," that Jesus promises, what it actually is and means, at least to me, especially that oft-repeated promise that it is "near," or my preferred translation "at hand." If so, how do I reach out and grasp it? I just don't buy the most conventional ways of reading that statement: that Jesus represents the kingdom, the only portal through which the rest of us can hope to enter it, a kind of "eye of the needle" who serves as a gatekeeper for this hidden realm. I believe

that Jesus is kinder and smarter than that, confident, as I am, in my abilities to see and understand if I really work at it. In other words, I believe he's saying almost the opposite of the conventional reading: that the kingdom of heaven is right here and right now and it can belong to me, as a first-hand experience, whenever and as often as I am willing to open my eyes and ears to it, without fear or inhibition. As I did today. And when I do, I can be, in W.B. Yeats' words, "changed, changed utterly," dying as a shell of myself to be reborn as someone better, except in this life, not the next.

2.

May 10, 2023

> *"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"* (Mark 1:14-15)

Today was another perfect day. I decided at the last minute, I mean after I was out the door, to walk to the Rhododendron Garden I wrote about in *Living Hidden,* that little square-block enclave about a mile from my house that is a mixed "forest" of trees on the young side—mostly cedars and hemlocks—with a fulsome understory of azaleas and rhododendrons, ranging from shrub- to tree-size. There is a dirt path that winds through and among it all, so pleasant. It is an out-of-the-way and not very well-known amenity, so I rarely encounter others there, maybe one person or a couple during the peak of the bloom. It's a peaceful, even joyful space. As is always the case with flora in uncultivated

settings the bounty from year to year varies quite a lot. The first year I visited the park, the rhododendrons were extravagant. The year after was a "down" year, last year back up again. This year is even more of an outlier. The winter weather persisted so far into spring that everything is 3-4 weeks behind schedule in its blooming cycle. The azaleas are now out in force and quite beautiful, but way late. The rhododendrons are not in bloom and are not likely to amount to much when they do arrive. Something about last summer and fall must have made it difficult for them to set their buds, which are sparse and small. And some of them are going directly to leaf, skipping the blossom stage entirely, which would happen from time to time with my rhododendrons back in Pittsburgh for reasons I could never quite fathom. No matter. I had a wonderful time wandering among them. And it reminded me to just see what's there and love it for what it is, right now, not to judge it by my expectations or to "blame" it for not being what I might selfishly wish it were. None of the natural spaces I walk in, nor any of the flora and fauna that live there, ever make such judgments about me, as I found out so blessedly in that first mournful fall, walking daily in Boyce Park, after my wife Carol died. No matter how weird or overwrought I was, I felt accepted and loved. I learned a lot from that about how to treat the people and things that cross my path. Like everything and everyone else I encounter, this little park this spring is exactly itself, quite happily so, and I should relish the time I get to spend with it.

I write about this park here by happenstance, of course, today's walk. But also because my first visits there several years ago were utterly transcendent. I felt over and over as if I had entered the "kingdom of heaven,"

which was not some remote afterlife or post-apocalyptic utopia, but right down the street and in my own head, when that inside is also outside my head, both ways, all at once. Which gets me to the passage I quote at the head of this section, the first words out of Jesus' mouth in Mark's gospel. Jesus says this after he "went into Galilee proclaiming the good news," in the aftermath of John the Baptist's arrest. All the elements of his brief announcement—time, the kingdom, nearness, repentance, belief, good news—have been ultra-processed now, over two millennia, into the bland smoothie of Christian orthodoxy one might hear on the average Sunday morning: Jesus has finally arrived, fulfilling prophesies of the coming Messiah; he is God's Son and therefore the portal to God's kingdom; do penance for your sins and believe what the gospels report to guide that penitentiary process. No real conundrums there. Simple. Settled. But I think this opening gambit is so much more exciting and radical than all of that. The primary driving force in the evolution from exciting to bland was, to me, the transformation of Jesus from human to divine, becoming thereby the "near" part of the kingdom of God Mark is indexing here. He is, in this paradigm, the actual Son of the actual God sent here to redeem us from our sins, especially the "original sin" documented in Genesis, though repentance for our own personal sins is also useful and necessary.

Okay, it may have taken a very long time for the Church to achieve full unanimity on these matters, often splintering into bitterly opposed factions over various kinds of hairsplittingly (il)logical gymnastics. But it did happen, delimiting access (in my view) to the kingdom of God to this single redemptive figure way back when

instead of locating it everywhere always. The first stage in this process was to get from Jesus-as-human to Jesus-as-God, which took at least five or six decades after his death to gain any traction at all (in John's gospel, e.g.) and several centuries thereafter to become sacrosanct. Now it is just taken, by Christians, as inarguably true.

I'll start by reopening this dilemma about Jesus' identity as a prelude to what I want to write about, transformative change, godly change, mostly so you know where I'm coming from theologically. If you find my opening gambit to be intolerably heretical, best stop now. It doesn't get any better along the way. So, is Jesus the Son of God or not? Good question. He never actually says expressly that he is, preferring the expression "son of Man," a conventional Jewish phrase that can be taken to mean anything from the predicted Messiah, the progeny of Adam, or just a human being. His disciples never say that he is the Son of God, either. Even Paul, the earliest documentarian for the burgeoning Christian community and the foundational source for the hierarchization of Christian ideology, never says expressly that Jesus is the Son of God. So how do you get from the kingdom's ineluctable nearness for all of us everywhere to the one-way-only-way—"No one comes to the Father except through me"—of John 14:6?

Well, it took a while.The most obvious hint of Jesus' Son-of-Godness in the Synoptic Gospels is the apparently divine intervention at the moment he is baptized, in the scene that opens Mark for example:

> *Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him*

> *like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."* (Mark 1:10-11)

Here we have "the Spirit descending" in an embodied form and a voice declaring "love" for "my Son." There seems to be some disagreement among scholars about the translation from Greek to English even of the word "son." I am no expert to be sure. I just want to indicate that there are alternative readings, like "beloved" for example. "He" saw the "Spirit," according to Mark, who doesn't say if anyone else did. That is, was this a personal or public experience of godly intervention, a big difference in theological terms?

Matthew and Luke, who (most likely) based their narratives on Mark, are in general agreement about this heavenly intervention, taking it all up a notch, one preferring "Holy Spirit," the other "the Spirit of God" as the force that descended on Jesus in the form of a dove, declaring him to be the son/beloved:

> *As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.* (Matthew 1:16-17)

. . .

> *When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are*

my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."
(Luke 3:21-22)

Matthew also says "he saw" suggesting a personal vision. Luke makes it sound more public. And they use more recognizable deific terms—the Spirit of God and the Holy Spirit—to characterize what the dove embodied, "descend[ing] or "alighting on him." This is the most direct reference to Jesus' familial connection with God I can find in the Synoptic Gospels (aside from what the "man with an impure spirit," driven out of his mind by demons, utters when he approaches Jesus to relieve him of his suffering, which I document in the next chapter.)

One of the ways of reading these three gospels that I've taken to lately is to imagine myself back into the earliest Christian communities, all these fervent converts trying to make sense of their new "religion" in the chaos of their grief over the sudden and violent loss of their spiritual mentor. My guiding question for this process is "who is this Jesus before (not after) he became God, even before the 'religion' he founded is clearly a religion, in the swirling turbulence that soon thereafter Paul is attempting to tame through his many trips and letters?" I may not be entirely happy with how Paul ends up doing this, but I've done enough administrative work in my own career to know, even on my tiny scale, that getting a diverse group of firm-minded people on the same page and then keeping them there to move forward collaboratively over time is no picnic. So maybe, I'm thinking now, I should be more tolerant of Paul, give him some credit for doing the best he could to manage this unruly flock.

It's not until John's gospel, composed last among the big four, most likely at the very end of the first century CE, that the assertion of Jesus' divinity, his equivalency with God, is declared:

> *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* (John 20: 31)

John initiates what becomes an extended argument toward this thesis with his famous opening lines, gliding poetically from "the Word" (which was "with God") to "the light" to the "flesh" to "the Son:"

> *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*
>
> *There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*
>
> *The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not*

> *of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*
>
> *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* (John 1:1-14)

I didn't need to quote this whole passage for my purposes but did mostly because I so admire it. The movement from the originary Word that is with God before there is anything, even time, to the light of life, to the Word made flesh, to the Son of God is a figurative *tour de force* of the highest order. One that twenty "books" later leads inevitably to the conclusive sentence I quote above, the first real inkling that Jesus was in fact God, which 20 centuries of Christian theological history has now embellished over and over until that unquestioned fact is ensconced as the sine qua non for inclusion in their churches. Despite the fact that Jesus never says it. Nor do his apostles. Nor does Paul.

That's a long preamble just to say that whether or not Jesus was the actual son of God makes very little difference to me personally. He had some wisdom to offer, and I want to know how it might apply to my own journey, one in which, by my own preference, continual, ongoing change (see my dream above and everything else I've written) is paramount. Which gets me back to the passage I opened this section with, one that seems on the face of it basic Christian boilerplate, but that, to my way of reading, inspires hope, something I have in too short supply most of the time. To get from boilerplate to inspiring, though, takes a way of reading

that may not be entirely copacetic in the now-standardized Catholic catechism.

3.

May 12, 2023

I had another series of dreams last night precipitated by the little meditation in the book I mentioned earlier, this one about discerning the proper relationship between apology and "forgiveness." I want to document them here mostly so I'll remember them and make use of them. In the first, it was bedtime. I was in a room with my daughter and son when they were very young, maybe 6 and 2 respectively, my father, and another figure about child-size wearing a way-oversized man's suit with the jacket pulled up over the head making age and gender indistinguishable. My father wanted this person out of the room and was quite aggressively pursuing that end with some butt-booting. "They" left quickly, crying, went to the edge of a very steep stairway in an adjacent room, about to throw themselves down suicidally. I rushed in and grabbed them. We went to the center of the room where I invited them to sleep with us. My son and daughter hugged me goodnight and I went to hug the stranger. The "hood" of the suit had fallen down so I could see it was a young girl, maybe 10 or so, thin, unkempt hair, a pair of wire-rim glasses bent out of shape, very jittery, apologizing not just for causing trouble but for her very existence. It was heartbreaking to me. She lay down and curled up on the hard floor. I went and got her a pillow, gave her my blanket, and held her for a few seconds. She said she'd

leave the next day. I just said "get a good night's sleep and we'll work it all out in the morning," knowing full well that she was there to stay as far as I was concerned.

I've written previously (in *Living Hidden*) about my commitment at a very young age to keep the "feminine" side of my identity alive in the face of overwhelming cultural pressure to exile "her" from the scene. This dream added another dimension to that story, indicating that there are certain kinds of apologies that cultural pressures keep telling us to generate simply because who we are doesn't match closely enough with the dominant identity stereotypes for "normalcy" in the moment. This is especially evident these days in relation to gender, all the hatred and violence, for example, directed to anyone on the LGBTQ spectrum. But equally insidious, this dream was saying, is the male toxicity that is produced by an ultra-patriarchal culture, where any hint of femininity in a man is considered scandalous, needs to be exiled, reducing men, at one extreme, to the gun-toting robots who shoot up a crowd in a school or mall to "prove" their manhood. I'm so glad I kept that little girl alive last night, and will going forward, saving her from culturally sanctioned self-destruction.

Another dream in this series was much simpler. I was walking through a homeless encampment, much like the one I see on my "downtown" walk here in Olympia. I had a big bag of peanuts. A man about my age asked for some, so I stopped to share them with him. Then, quite aggressively, he asked me to make him a bowl of macaroni. I don't generally like being told what to do, so I said no, equally aggressively. As I walked on I realized the selfish stupidity of my response, went back and apologized to him, just straightforwardly, admitting I

was wrong, hoping he'd forgive me, which he did. Then I went and made him a big bowl of macaroni. I had a number of dreams after that, becoming more and more comical, even absurd, all having to do with making bowls of macaroni. This is the other side of the apology coin: Quite often I do things that are simply selfish, for no other reason than my own sense of entitlement. I may not be able to stop doing those things entirely. But if I recognize them quickly and apologize for them, then change my behavior to match my intentions, at least I'll begin to chip away at the façade of privilege that promotes such transgressions. And maybe, just maybe, with the help of that little girl with whom I am continuing to "work out" a happy and equitable relationship, I'll get nearer and nearer to the kingdom of heaven!

But let me get back on track by returning to the passage I quoted at the top of section 2 above, where all this started (Jesus' opening salvo in Mark—"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!") and try to redeem it into some semblance of the genuine beauty and mystery I believe it holds hidden now. I'll start at the back end with the word "repent," what seems like a very simple concept, one we generally experience as riven with angst. At some point relatively recently there was a shift in how this term was read—I'm going to locate it, without certainty, in the late 60s with the inception of the Charismatic Renewal movement in the Catholic church, originating at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, where I encountered it fleetingly in the early 70s, and then again more directly because of Carol's interest in it in the 90s. One index of this approach was a return to the actual Greek word that gets translated

into "repent" in this passage: *metanoia*, which means literally to change one's mind, or, in this context, to experience a genuine spiritual conversion, specifically via the Holy Spirit. In other words, less like going to confession and doing penance and more like what I described above as falling in love, that sudden, transformative moment of profound change in a relationship, when the diurnal seems to turn into the eternal. This sort of "conversion" may resemble in some ways the "born again" religious revival experience, but it is less public, dramatic, and ostentatious; and I'm inclined to think more durable, not a one-and-done but the opening gesture toward a lifetime's work.

Repentance is of course a concept deeply embedded in Christian ideology, focused mostly on a mode of personal abnegation that leads on the near side to private prayers for absolution and on the far side to those who simulate physically the suffering of Jesus on the cross, nails and all. My experience of that as a child was simply going to confession weekly in a thoroughly rote way and saying a few prayers afterward. Then going back to business as usual. I have little interest in the sorts of "conversions" that arise from this set of practices. There may be a few historically that are consequential. But for the most part this process generally functions as an institutional mechanism to induce guilt among, in order to assert control over, the laity.

Metanoia has the potential to be far more dramatic and radical than that. Philosophical and religious history is rife with examples of such conversions, some way before Jesus came along. My favorite is Parmenides, one of the

Greek pre-Socratic philosophers writing in the fifth century BCE, who opens his meditation with these lines:

> *The horses that take me to the ends of my mind*
> *were taking me now: the drivers put me*
> *on the road to the Goddess, the manifest Way*
> *that leads the enlightened through every delusion.*
> *I was on that road. Wizard mares*
> *strained at the chariot and maidens drove it.* (11)

I've been to confession lots of time in my life. Never felt anything like that! Clearly, this is a transcendent moment, these horses that take the young man up into the heavens to meet and learn hidden truths from the female goddess who drew him there. What I like about this story, as a template, beyond the conversion moment, is that the horses are taking him now, as if the experience of godliness is either continuous or keeps repeating itself, lifelong.

The one I document in "Teaching Secrets" from *the Hermetica*, via Hermes Trismegistus, is similarly transcendent, as are pretty much all of the major ones in the Buddhist and pre-Buddhist tradition, as far back as Lao Tzu and Zhuangzi, including, of course, the Buddha himself. The Christian tradition is likewise peppered with famous examples of conversions of this kind, beginning with the big one, Paul struck blind on the road to Damascus, shifting his fanatic energy to the other side of the equation in Christian history. Without that intervention, the church may well have petered out during the first century or spawned a host of alternative approaches conversing/arguing as a loose "community," which personally I would have preferred as a structural template for Christianity: a dis-organized

religion with no obvious hierarchy, instead of the opposite, which is what it gradually became over the first several centuries CE, starting with Paul. Augustine is another example. So are Constantine, John Wesley, C.S Lewis, and Thomas Merton, to name a few from early times to our time. And it's not simply a male phenomenon. There is Thecla, Hildegard of Bingen, Clare of Assisi, Kateri Tekawitha, Sojourner Truth, Tsai Su Juan, et al., adding diversity to this list, which is only the tip of the iceberg in the history of transformative conversions of this sort.

I've spent so much time on this because in my view once one makes that translational shift with this key term—repent to metanoia—every other key term in that promise can be similarly reimagined. For example, what is the "time" that has "come?" Read retroactively through the convex lens of two millennia of Christian orthodoxy, that time is right then and it has "come" because Jesus has finally arrived, the Messiah, after centuries of waiting, about to start his brief ministry to provide a list of instructions (the most boring version) or an actual portal (somewhat more intriguing) to deliver his followers to the kingdom of God.

How his listeners might have heard that nearness of the kingdom of God is no simple matter, but it wouldn't have been the way John did, the only portal to "the Father." Jesus' audience were almost all Jews. And many of his followers were apocalyptics who believed that the end-times were right around the corner, next week maybe, not in some remote, imagined future. The time to change minds was now, as in RIGHT NOW, and "thy kingdom come" was an immediate promise not a vague, wistful threat. In other words, for them, the

"kingdom" is not Jesus "now" having "come." He is just the messenger, warning them to get right. There are indications of this same sense of impending doom in Paul, when, for example (in Corinthians 1) he advises the congregation not to marry if they haven't yet. There just isn't time (I'm guessing) from his point of view to tarry with partnering and starting families. Get your spiritual affairs in order, is what I hear him saying, right now, before it's too late.

As to the nearness, traditional doctrine would have us believe that this Jesus, who has come to save us, is our only legitimate portal toward salvation. In the moment he delivers this message, then, he is referring to himself presently. I hear a much more depersonalized version of timeliness in this, that the "now" he refers to (and that is one alternative translation of "has come") is in fact eternally recursive, a potentially transformative moment that repeats over and over. We can imagine this in terms of actual perception, as the Romantic poets and many Taoists do, our capacity to bring the world into being in an extravagantly vital form moment by moment simply by waking up. Or it might be akin to what I talked about above, that chronic falling in love so essential for spiritually changeful relationships. I even speculate (in "The Curious Cosmos," further ahead here) that the whole of the cosmos is being reanimated—created from nothing—over and over, instant by instant, by a godly spirit, reducing time itself to nothing but a useful delusion.

4.

May 13, 2023

Last night's meditation in the book my sister-in-law gave me had to do with "dancing with the shadow"—our darker inner self— to awaken to what the writer called "the way of love." My primary dream seemed pertinent to this. I was inside a house-sized container made of metal and wood with several rooms. There were no windows, so everything was sepia-toned. There were a number of other people there, most of whom I didn't know. Everything was either rusty or caked with grunge. The whole structure may have been a ship because someone I like and admire, realizing the engine was beyond repair, was building a new one. I recall at one point watching him about to start it up and asking: "Do we have an engine yet?" And then we did. An outside voice was urging us to clean up the inside space. I started working on that with a scrub brush. One person "on board," kind of snide and unpleasant—someone I did know at one point in my life—complained over and over that this was a stupid waste of time and energy. Most of the others joined the task, more or less energetically. It took a while but as things got cleaner and cleaner we could see that the metal surfaces were a very lustrous bronzy color and the wooden surfaces were adorned with colorful images. The meaning of this seems utterly obvious, so I guess I'll use Jesus' approach here: Those who have ears to hear this "parable" will know instantly what it means. Those who don't won't. No matter what I say.

Which gets me to the next element in the quote from Mark: "the good news" and how it is inevitably related

to "belief." One of the things I most admire about Jesus is his willingness to stand up quite forcefully, brilliantly, cleverly, to the powers that be in the Jewish religious community. I know roughly now what the Pharisees and Sadducees were in the institutional and cultural hierarchy back then. When I was younger, hearing quite admiringly the ways Jesus flouted their silly challenges on their own turf, I thought of them simply as entitled, authoritarian hypocrites. In my head I organized all of Jesus' radical resistance (much like the radical resistance I was involved with myself) under the rubric of what he called a "new covenant." Jesus may not have been willing or able simply to override what we now call the Old Testament (he was Jewish through and through after all), with its endless litanies of rules for all manner of things that seemed (to me and to him) to have nothing to do with spirituality, under the supervision of an interventionist, vengeful God. But what he proffers directly in his own voice, at least as it is later reported, changes that platform dramatically.

One of my favorite examples is his dismissal of all the hocus-pocus about bodily matters, as in this case:

> *Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!*
>
> *Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, `Honor your father and mother' and `Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'*

But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, `Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to `honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

"`These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'"

Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand.

What goes into a man's mouth does not make him `unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him `unclean.'" (Matthew 15:1-11)

Pretty stern stuff! I'm amused by the disciples' first question to Jesus in the aftermath of this meeting:

Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" (Matthew 15:12)

As if Jesus might be too obtuse to notice this! The Pharisees go off and try to think of ways to kill Jesus with some legitimacy. "Offended" indeed!

> *He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.*
>
> *Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."* (Matthew 15:13-14)

Yes, I'd say he knew they were offended because he intended to offend them. Bigtime. Jesus does go on to explain to the disciples what he meant, with a quite human and somewhat humorous air of exasperation. Here is the subsequent conversation they all have:

> *Peter said, "Explain the parable to us."*
>
> *"Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?*
>
> *But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*
>
> *These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them."* (Matthew 15:15-20)

Simple as that, guys.

I sympathize with Jesus' impatience with the inability of the disciples to hear what this relatively simple, if dramatic, change of moral venue means and implies. But in this case, I am also sympathetic with them. This

recission of the old contract must seem kind of shocking to them. I'm sure they understand that Jesus' love-based approach to matters of this sort is not entirely orthodox. And maybe they like the idea of getting rid of all the nit-picky rules. But they may also fear the inevitable repercussions from the powers that be. There may be "good news" long-term in Jesus' love-based message; there is also and quite obviously some potential bad news right around the corner for Jesus and them in the aftermath of this kerfuffle. They may not be astute enough to understand all of his sayings, but they are observant enough to realize that getting these kind of people mad at you is not such a good idea.

That's where belief comes into it. Without firm belief, there is only endless waffling in the face of whatever fears the powers that be induce. Belief is stable and durable, a rudder to keep the ship on course in both calm and rough seas; a way to remember the long-term good news in the face of the many short-term bad newses that afflict all human endeavors, especially ethical ones. So get your engine going and clean up your craft! Believing in the love of the good-news part and resisting the fear of the bad-news part requires a deep and overriding complementary belief in oneself. Jesus has this in spades, of course, seems to seek out these opportunities to aggravate the "establishment." The disciples, he knows, need to learn how to do this, too, as do we all if we want to follow down any difficult and sometimes dangerous ethical path in life. Or our fear will be constant and debilitating.

Another good example of Jesus intentionally testing the patience of the Pharisees is this one, pertinent to healing

on the sabbath. Matthew documents the incident and its consequences quite succinctly and chillingly:

> *Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"*
>
> *He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."*
>
> *Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus*. (Matthew 12:9-14)

The main element of the new covenant Jesus says he is here to establish is love, which operates 24/7/365, no matter the established conventions that might inhibit or even prohibit our acting on it. There are, of course, a few Old Testament references to God's "covenant of love" with his people, but very few. This is the aspect of God's relationship with us that Jesus chooses to highlight and amplify, making it his keystone when he renegotiates the ten commandments down to two, love their common element, in his famous battle of wits, first with the Pharisees and Herodians, and then with the Sadducees, who are trying desperately to trap Jesus, "looking for a way to arrest him" via their tricky

questions. Once again, they are no match for him. Finally,

> *One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"*
>
> *"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."*
>
> *"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."*
>
> *When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.* (Mark 12:28-34)

This is, essentially, the new covenant, one based on love rather than penitence, all those burnt offerings and sacrifices. It is also the pathway to the kingdom of heaven.

5.

May 14, 2023

Today is Mother's Day, another one of those family-related holidays that is vexatious for me, more mysteriously than unpleasantly now, the customary veils that separate past, present and future so dysfunctionally in Western culture becoming more and more permeable, what once-was becoming present again, vaguely visible through the mist of memory; what is-right-in-front-of-me animated vividly with my own recollections; what might-be beckoning me forward toward transformations yet to come: Scrooge's three ghosts reconciled, blurring one into the other and back again, the way time actually functions once you escape from the stupid rigors of human invention, like a perfect sauce concocted by a great chef in which all the ingredients are vivid to the taste both collectively and individually simultaneously.

It is another gorgeous day in this late-spring-typical string of them, already 70 by 8 AM, the first day since last fall that is shirt-sleeve warm enough for me to take my morning walk comfortably without a jacket. In keeping with my general rule for best-days, I went out to Woodard Bay. On the way, I decided spontaneously to listen to the recording of the last talk I gave at Pitt pre-retirement, called "All the Time in the World," the last chapter in this book now, wherein I make a very express argument on behalf of residing always, if possible, in the mode of time I felt so soothingly this morning. When I got to Woodard Bay I looked out at the headwaters where just a week or two ago many buffleheads were passing their winter here, dunking and diving in the rich

waters. Now they are back up in the tundra raising new broods of buffleheads who will delight me next winter. I could almost see them in the still waters, which reflected about a dozen tiny puffball-clouds, as if they, too, wanted to remember what was there, using those clouds to mark places for the missing buffleheads.

The parking lot was nearly full, a rarity, so I figured I'd encounter many people along the way, which I did. First among them was a family heading back already, mother, father, a daughter about 10, a son about 6, all laughing out-loud-happily, reminding me of Carol, Bridget, Joe and myself 25 years ago, not wistfully but vividly, like that world was still here, which it is. Down at the point where Woodard Bay meets Henderson Inlet it was busier than I've ever seen it: a mother with two young daughters on a bench watching the many dozens of cormorants returning from the inlet to deliver food to their own families in all those nests on the other side of the bay; a bigger family at the shoreline, young children digging in the sand, parents relaxing; a middle-aged couple picnicking at one of the seaside tables, watching, as I was, the family of geese—parents, five goslings—which I've been encountering over the last ten days or so, the little ones chomping away furiously at the greenery, almost twice as big now as when I first saw them. I took all of this in, my memories intermingling with this variegated presence in the most delightful ways.

At the portal to the path back up into the forest, a young black-tail deer was chomping away at some delectables, most likely the fawn I saw several times last year with her mother right there. There is something special about this particular "neck of the woods." For about a quarter

of a mile in from this spot, it is jam-packed with all kinds of life. This is where the black-tail deer live, the only place I ever see them, a plot of maybe a few acres, never nervous around people, even with their young in tow. I had one walk right up to me a month or so ago, like I wasn't even there, or it didn't care that I was, so different from the white-tail deer back east who know what hunting is and does and are justifiably skittish. This stretch is also full of birds, the towhees I see regularly hopping around close to ground, the pileated woodpeckers hammering away higher up in the trees, warblers and wrens and robins and every now and then a rarer songbird all announcing their presence and claiming their turf. There is a family of red squirrels, some chipmunks, and if I'm extra-lucky I'll see one of the reclusive rough-skinned newts that breed at this time of year in the little pond there. And, of course, the trees.

As I walked up the path I drifted into one of those briefly ecstatic states I am sometimes gifted with in these woods especially. I realized for the first time that many of them happen exactly in this area, and I knew immediately why. I've said repeatedly, because it's true, that what I have now of a social community is in the forest and with trees. I walk in the same places over and over because I enjoy their company and they mine. When I pass the trees I know best, I reach out and touch them, a way to say hi. And they reach back. Over many years in these spaces I've accumulated more and more friends, so I'm reaching out a lot. The thing that struck me today was how often I do that in this little stretch, over and over, cedars, alders, big-leaf, maples. Even the more reclusive firs are quite friendly there. And the "queen" of this forest, an enormous big-leaf maple, lives there and now welcomes me into her realm. Some of the

trees seem to me to be paired off in couples, others in family constellations, parents and children, my own figurative superimpositions, I'm sure. If I had a human community of genuine friends, I think it would feel like that: me being me and them being them quite amicably, happily, gently present with and to one another, a social mélange where boundaries are permeable, much like the one I describe in relation to time above. All of this emotional resonance gradually diminished over the course of my walk. When I got back to the lot, an overflow of cars was parked up along the road. I hope everyone who came in one had as happy a Mother's Day as mine. If you are lucky enough to have a human community of friends, I hope you feel among them just like I did today.

6.

Love is but a song we sing
and fear's the way we die.
You can make the mountains ring
or make the angels cry.

The Youngbloods

One of the most salutary effects of a love-based faith, whether it's in yourself or a higher power, is a diminishment of fear and its toxic effect not only on personal psychological processes but also on social and cultural processes. They say the Bible uses some variation of "do not be afraid" anywhere from 366 times (if you believe the Irish legend, one for each day and a spare) to around 100 times (if you prefer the linguistic

literalists.) By the same token, some version of "fear God" or "fear the Lord" appears anywhere from 490 times (for the more expansive translators) to (again with the picky literalists) 80 times. In any case, as far as fear goes, no matter which counters you prefer, it seem to be a wash. We're supposed to fear and fear not at roughly an equal rate. My main interest here though is what Jesus says about fear, and he comes down decidedly on the "don't be afraid" side of the equation, which in itself indicates something about his new covenant. Love more, fear less. A pretty good recipe for a better life I'd say.

At one extreme of the fear spectrum is what we call paranoia, an interesting counterpart to metanoia. The latter, this joyful changefulness, is rooted in confidence and faith. The former is static, like a deer fixed in the headlights of irrational fear. The Greek roots of this term are para + noos, literally to be "beside one's mind," unable to think, which for the Greeks was the metaphoric definition of madness. Meta + noos on the other hand means "beyond one's mind," where we end up after thinking. A subtle shift. From madness to transcendence. Which gets me to my final move here: right-mindedness, what it is and is not, at least from Jesus' point of view. This is a chronic concern for me personally. I am not what you'd call a "normal" person, in my head I mean. I leave my head behind, in the woods especially, prone to "losing my mind" in joyful ecstasies, way too often to qualify for that moniker. And I spend almost all my time alone now, honing eccentricities into a lifestyle. I've also had, on the darker side, significant mental health issues in my life, including a nervous breakdown and "complicated grief." I am not, nor have I ever been psychotically paranoid. But I know

what fear feels like and how it can degrade life, sometimes abrasively over time, sometimes quite suddenly. I fear fear respectfully.

On the other hand, most often I couldn't care a whit about how, if at all, I match up with cultural expectations about right-mindedness. I've actually spent a good deal of time and energy trying to evade and avoid those ultra-boring (to me) stereotypes, much to my satisfaction for the most part, even when they were quite expensive professionally or socially. And I've worked equally hard, over the last eight years especially, to try to cure myself of the need for external validation for who I am or what I do or make, that bane of commercial capitalism that afflicts us all, especially writers who crave an audience. It's hard when almost no one reads what you write, and the way I self-publish my work for free pretty much guarantees that outcome. I've explained my reasons for eschewing the conventional marketplace in detail elsewhere, and I'm not going back, though I'm still frustrated from time to time by the inevitable consequences of that decision.

It is equally hard not to be seen, in the ways Buhner and Jesus recommend we see the others among us, which in my largely asocial world is a constant and challenging state of affairs. But I have always believed that one needs to see one's own work, as a teacher or writer especially, in generational terms, on a time scale that runs past, even way past, one's own lifetime. It takes a lot of patience and faith—both of which I have in short supply most of the time—to commit to such an extended timeline. Jesus is a good example. He could have ended up a deadender, an historical footnote. He

had a faith he wouldn't and he didn't. I'm not Jesus of course, but I like his style.

I enjoy the way Jesus tells his followers over and over not to be anxious or afraid. I think he knows something of great value in that regard. I could go into an extended discussion of the many pertinent parables with this message, but I'm guessing you know most of those already. So I'm going to close with two vexing, even humorous stories, told by all the Synoptic Gospelists pertaining to the problem of right-mindedness in relation to matters of spirit. In the case of Jesus, as in the case of many other mystics, prophets, seers and gurus, the problem people had back then, when he was in their midst, and I would argue that we have still to this day, is deciding where on the spectrum he lies between godliness and madness, and what those states of mind actually are and do. It's easy, of course, to presume Jesus' right-mindedness after 2000 years of his commodification and domestication, while doing all manner of things he chastises the Jewish power brokers of his day for doing, and expressly prohibits among his disciples. His proponents over the centuries, up to this day, have sometimes invented an "alternative set of facts," *a la* Kellyanne Conway, that matched up neatly with their own preferences, and then cherry-picked a quote here and there to justify those misbehaviors, choosing the apparent "sanity" of their own comfortable lives over the more uncomfortable alternative, which must look like madness to them.

Coleridge captures this perspectival dilemma quite succinctly at the end of "Kubla Khan," his drug-induced "vision" having been interrupted, remembering the extraordinary encounter he had with the "damsel

with a dulcimer" "singing of Mount Abora." He then laments:

> *Could I revive within me*
> *Her symphony and song,*
> *To such a deep delight 'twould win me,*
> *That with music loud and long,*
> *I would build that dome in air,*
> *That sunny dome! those caves of ice!*
> *And all who heard should see them there,*
> *And all should cry, Beware! Beware!*
> *His flashing eyes, his floating hair!*
> *Weave a circle round him thrice,*
> *And close your eyes with holy dread*
> *For he on honey-dew hath fed,*
> *And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

That's the problem in a nutshell (pardon the pun): Anyone witnessing the spectacle of what some poet/visionary has built in thin air from nothing but music is likely to be both astonished and afraid. So which way to go: Are these powers divine or demonic, sane or mad? Same problem with Jesus, especially back then. Early in his ministry, for example, with Jesus healing the sick and infirm right and left, driving out demons by the dozens, he began to draw big crowds. Here's the opening of the first scene I'm interested in, depicting one side of the equation of how to discern godliness from madness:

> *Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."* (Mark 3:20-21)

What an odd, to me almost comical moment, Jesus' own family coming to drag him away, telling the crowd to ignore him because he is "out of his mind," and not in a good way. It's only one sentence, but a stunning one. Immediately:

> *. . . the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."* (Mark 3:22)

In this case, the "experts," the powers that be in the Jewish hierarchy, take a slightly different tack, declaring him "possessed" by the devil, for only a demon could drive out demons, but toward the same end: Ignore this guy, he's possessed, again, not in a good way. Here is Jesus' quite brilliant response to this latter charge:

> *So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house. Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin."*
>
> *He said this because they were saying, "He has an impure spirit."* (Mark 3:23-30)

This is a famous parable, usually presented, by my childhood recollection, as a warning not to divide one's own mind spiritually. Commit fully and wholeheartedly to Jesus and his program or you'll never reach the kingdom. But he's using a much more complex analogy here, toward the opposite purpose, saying it makes no sense for "the prince of demons" to turn on the lesser demons who are serving his agenda. Sooner or later "his end has come." *Touche*, I'd say!

Then there's the "good news" part: Everything can be forgiven except blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, an "eternal sin." Whether or not Jesus is implying that he is or houses the Holy Spirit and these personal critiques are blasphemous is open to debate. But it's a pretty slick move: "I'm not out of my mind, you are! And you're going to pay for it!" Which to some extent is the central conundrum in situations of this sort: Is the perceived "mad" person the only sane person in the room, everyone else "possessed" by whatever cultish fetishes are presumed to be the norm by the dominant culture of the moment?

The scene continues:

> *Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."*
>
> *"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.*
>
> *Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my*

brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:31-35)

This is another famous moment in Jesus progress from lunacy to heavenliness, or vice versa, depending on your point of view: He disavows his own family who, from his point of view, misunderstand him completely. What choice does he have really: "Hey, your mom and the boys are outside and they want to take you home because you're an embarrassment, a bit too much on the loopy side even for them?" Give in to that and your "ministry" is over. Jesus returns to this gesture later, making it an essential step on the path to the kingdom. Here's how Mark documents it:

"Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29-30)

There's a lot dependent, then—good and bad, beautiful and painful, short-term and long-term—on whether you think the source of this guidance is right-minded.

Here are some other passages on the same theme from Matthew and Luke:

Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. And a scribe came up and said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has

nowhere to lay his head." Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." (Matthew 8:18-22)

. . .

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:25-27)

. . .

Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 10:21- 22)

. . .

For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:35-39)

The message in all of this is not a simple "Hate your family and translate all of their power over you over to

me," the sort of isolating strategy abusers often use to gaslight their victims. And it may sound intolerably harsh. But when read in the context of right-mindedness the message is more nuanced: "If your family, or anyone else, thinks you're nuts for following me using your own best lights, then you've got to decide if they're right or I am, because I don't." Beyond that, in the cultural context of that moment, declaring that you believe Jesus, or anyone, is the "king," a God even, might make you eligible for the death penalty, often at the hands of your "sane" family. So handle with care.

The other example of "right-mindedness," on the opposite side of the spectrum, comes a couple of books later in Mark:

> *They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.*
>
> *When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!" For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you impure spirit!"*
>
> *Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"*

"My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed. (Mark 5:1-20)

I love this one, all those demon-infested pigs stampeding into the lake. To witness something like that must have been truly stunning. And I love the end result for the man who precipitated this: "They saw the man . . . dressed and in his right mind. And they were afraid."

Afraid of a man dressed and in his right mind? Surely it's not the man who scares them. It's his sudden, unfathomable transformation at the hands of someone they're not sure they can trust, all those pigs in the lake and all! Just like those who witness what Coleridge claims he could build in thin air out of music, crying:

> *Beware! Beware!*
> *His flashing eyes, his floating hair!*
> *Weave a circle round him thrice,*
> *And close your eyes with holy dread*
> *For he on honey-dew hath fed,*
> *And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

They understand that he may well have "drunk the milk of Paradise," but they'd rather not follow him all the way back there. You just need to leave too much behind here, including sometimes your family. "Must be an easier way. Let's go home and forget about it. Or, if it gets scary enough, let's kill him."

7.

May 15, 2023

> *Now wisdom is fine*
> *But the heart leads the way*
> *And nothing can change my memory*
> *Like a wise man I patiently wait*
>
> *No matter how long*
> *Human nature is cruel*
> *But all hope is gone*
> *If you don't act on*
> *The words of a fool*

Now times may be tough
But we must survive
And I'd rather be dead with you
Than go on alive

That's my one obsession
My Christian belief
For he who has loved and lost
Then loved he shall be

This is a fuller context for the line I use as an epigraph for this essay. I have no idea if Barry Gibb (who wrote this song all the way back in the 70s and didn't record it until quite recently) might consider Jesus one of these fools whose words we need to act on, though he does reference his Christian belief here. But the dynamic of the challenge at hand is exactly the same: life and death, love and loss, all tumbling around in the same cauldron, the outcome hanging on what we decide to do when we hear such stunning words—are they right-minded or not?

How to sort through the maybe-outlandish-sounding ones we intend to act on—including our own when they are deemed foolish by the those around us—then sticking to them devotedly, is a problem everyone faces sooner or later. It may be a familial one, especially when there is profound disagreement about how one should pursue their ambitions in life. It is clearly a political one, where we often have to choose one "side" or the other in debates where both sides cast the alternative as lunacy, even demonic. It may be a professional one where one needs to choose mentors to cultivate and to

avoid as they enter the ongoing conversations there. And it is always a spiritual one: The human universe is full of "fools" who claim godly authority, and every religious or spiritual philosophy is deemed a cult by some, salvation by others. Discerning the difference is a necessary step in creating an ethical or moral identity. The stakes are rarely for us as high as they were for Jesus and his followers, matters of life and death. But they are consequential. Paying close attention to the details and not following authoritarian leadership blindly—i.e., having a genuine critical sensibility to guide the process, under right-minded leadership—is not, in the current parlance, "woke." It is sane.

I'm going to conclude with two quotes that counter the sort of lunacy that elevates "god-fearingness" to full paranoia in many religious sects with metanoia-supporting promises to deliver ongoing love unconditionally and forever. They are not entirely integral to this essay; I just like them. They sound kind of sane to me. The first is from Jesus, the second from Isaiah, who is one of Jesus' go-to sources as he invents and enacts his mission:

> *I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you.* (John 14:18-20)

That's a nice promise, one we can make to ourselves and one another, absent the "Father" part of course. As is this one:

"For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,"
*says the Lord, who has compassion on you. (*Isaiah 54:10)

This is my view of what the kingdom of heaven actually is, unremitting love and compassion, for me, here and now, everything out there in me and everything in me out there, united as one, so that in my receiving, I might also learn how to share. I may not spend enough time there. But the time I do makes all the rest of the time I have to spend in this worrisome workaday world, where the words of fools are cacophonous, so much more enjoyable and generative. And it helps me to decide where among all those words, including my own, some semblance of right-mindedness might reside, so that I can act on them, over and over, keeping them "new" for me "now," deferring as long as possible the day I fear most, when all hope is gone.

Pelagius, Augustine and the Death of Nature

Often in my lectures when I use the phrase "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" to describe our nation's political system, audiences laugh. No one has ever explained why accurately naming this system is funny. The laughter is itself a weapon of patriarchal terrorism. It functions as a disclaimer, discounting the significance of what is being named. It suggests that the words themselves are problematic and not the system they describe.

bell hooks

1.

That's an ominous title, I know, hyperbolic in exactly the ways I most enjoy. Likewise for bell hooks' hauntingly succinct characterization of the cultural system we live in now, a patriarchy that has generated and supports the three other domineering ambitions she applies to it as modifiers. Just because it makes people giggle uncomfortably to hear it doesn't mean it's not true. It is.

We tend to talk about dysfunctions of this sort vaguely, as "cultural" or "traditional" or "conventional," as if individual moments and people are not directly accountable. It's just the way things are and have been as far back as most of us can see. But every now and then moments and people stand out and it's possible to say, yes, that's how things went awry and why. I'll be looking here at one such. The forces hooks names, though

ensconced in Western culture for millennia by then, were significantly fortified in the historical milieu I want to document in this essay, the 5th century CE, via a theological debate that took place at the heart two of the most domineering patriarchal systems Western culture has created, the Roman empire and the Catholic church (then recently merged via Emperor Constantine), both of which had significant shared "skin" in the outcome of that match, neither of which went about the process in ways that are even remotely funny. And at the center of this debate were two actual men: Augustine of Hippo and a Celtic monk named Pelagius.

You may be familiar with Augustine, as an eminent saint at least, if not his writing. Much less likely that you've heard of Pelagius. I knew next to nothing about him until a few weeks ago. But the version of Christianity he proffered as an alternative to the established one Augustine defended is quite remarkable, enough so for me to believe that the world we live in right now might be fundamentally different, and so much better, had he prevailed in their very personal dispute. Even if Augustine had just kept his mouth (or pen) shut, there might have been enough of a groundswell toward Pelagianism in the Christian community (the fact that it was growing in popularity not just in the remote regions of the empire but in Rome itself was one thing that precipitated Augustine's virulent response to it) to put a serious dent in Roman imperialism and, thereby, in Western patriarchal thinking; maybe not enough to bring it all down, but at least enough to provide a formidable alternative. And our world might not be in the midst of multiple manmade ecological and societal disasters now. But he didn't and we are where we are.

2.

As I'm sure you can tell having read this far into the book, I am neither a scholar nor an historian in relation to the wisdom texts I am writing about here, at least not one who would be considered properly credentialed in theological or academic circles, where pedigree and resume are everything. When I started my career in the academy, back in the 70s, with an ambition to establish common ground across traditional and then impermeable disciplinary boundaries in my field (English studies), I was sometimes dismissed by elite colleagues as a dilettante, someone not credibly siloed in any of the extant specialisms that marked off recognized territories of expertise, their only way of imagining legitimacy in the academy. In keeping with my temperament, this only added to my passion for the work I truly wanted to do, always arguing for and conceptualizing synthesis rather than dissection, collaboration rather than competition, merger rather than separation. In the longer run this proved to be a powerful (and somewhat more acceptable) way of envisioning scholarly enterprise in the communities I both joined and helped to constitute.

I never along the way let myself be deterred by the inane critique of being "jack of all trades, master of none," which is a mode of bullying and not (I was smart enough to recognize) a legitimate counterargument. I believed right from the outset, as many other historical figures have (Plato and Walt Whitman are two of my favorites in this regard), that there is a level of master-thinking that is both pertinent to and supervisory for "all trades." The hard part has always been finding a discourse to render

that level of thinking in a form that others might endorse and appreciate.

These days, I would call what I do "systems-level" thinking, which is becoming more and more central to our cultural conversations about all manner of things, including the most urgent, like climate change and the ongoing 6th great extinction, which demand comprehensive and integrative solutions. In other words, my aversion to siloing my intellectual curiosity deeply and narrowly is (to me at least) precisely what makes it powerful and generative. That is the sort of work I want still to do in whatever arenas I'm inclined to enter; except now (blessedly, in retirement) I no longer have any entitled colleagues to contend with or defend myself against. I can simply let my curiosity range freely, fully authorized to indulge my anti-authoritarian heart in the ways that are the most fun for me.

I say all of this well into the book to let you know that I am quite aware of how outside the box my "wisdom text readings" lie, especially in relation to the Christian Bible. Heretical is the word I use here and there, as much an index of pride as it is an admission of doctrinal dispute. What follows now extends this trajectory into another arena and time period, the fifth century, the Christian church now fully ensconced as a "State" religion (Roman having merged with Catholic a hundred years before) with a well-established orthodoxy enforced by a similarly well-established hierarchy of male-dominated clerical bureaucrats, an institution ideally (and intentionally) designed to promulgate the kind of society that defines Western culture to this day, the one that bell hooks describes so accurately and cogently in my epigraph.

My purpose here is to go back those 1600 years to examine a significant tipping point toward this end, a now long-settled (therefore ignored) theological argument, that, had it gone the other way, might have averted, or at least deferred, not just the extinction catastrophes that both humanity and the earth face right now, but also the vicious culture wars, prosecuted by devout Christians, that doom so many to poverty, persecution, even death, simply because of their ethnic-racial- or gender-otherness. Those are big claims, I know. But I believe I have a case to make; and I'll enjoy the challenge of making it.

3.

I walked this morning to the Rhododendron Garden a mile or so from my house, the one I wrote about in "The Time Has Come." It must certainly, I thought, be nearing the peak of the blooming season for those plants, a month late this year, and I wanted to see how they've gotten on since my last visit a couple of weeks ago. As it turns out, everything was much the same, azaleas more flamboyant than usual, rhododendrons much less so. This latter fact must have something very specific to do with the microclimate in this little enclave, since the cultivated rhododendrons in my yard and every other yard and garden I pass on my various walks are more extravagant that usual, fulsome with flowers. In the park on the other hand many of them have gone directly to leaf, something last summer or fall having intruded enough on their "normal" schedule to inhibit the formation of flower buds. I took all of this in today without any particular emotional valence, my preferred state of mind now. Everything blooming out there, I

thought, just is what it is and is, by definition, as an expression of life, not just good enough for me, but good.

I had been wondering until I wrote that sentence what, if anything, my little morning jaunt had to do with what I'm writing about, this ancient dispute between two theologians. I assumed it did, and now I see why. The whole concept of the intrinsic goodness, godliness really, of nature was at the core of their dispute, as I'll explain, a very specific condition for relationship not just with what happens to be flowering down on Springwood Street, but with everything else out there, all the way up to and through the cosmos. That's one thing.

Secondly, there is the matter just mentioned of the impact of what might seem like tiny microclimatic variations on local spaces which turn out to be much more consequential in their effects than those "causes" seem to warrant. Culture in general, including religious culture, is like that, too. A small change here and there ripples out toward transformative effects, for better or worse. In the case I'm examining here, the "small change" at stake was monumental in its impact, affecting almost every aspect of Western cultural history as it pertains to the matter of "goodness," which is, at least to me, of utmost importance, whether I'm walking among the rhododendrons or forming an ethical identity.

4.

I happen from previous reading to be familiar with the work of Augustine of Hippo, and I was aware that late in his career he invested a significant amount of his intellectual capital trying to forestall the effects of

Pelagianism at that formative stage of church history, *On Nature and Grace* his most (in)famous weapon in that regard. I assumed (wrongly) that the argument he took up had primarily to do with an arcane dispute about the status of original sin, the legacy of Adam, in human history. It did of course, but now I know it involved so much more, a microclimatic shift that has altered Christian/Western cultural weather dramatically for centuries now.

A couple of weeks ago I happened by accident on a reference to this Celtic theologian Pelagius, specifically in relation to his argument with St. Augustine, one he lost, generating the dismissive term "Pelagian controversy" (or, ultimately, "heresy," demoting Pelagius to a footnote in Christian history and launching Augustine into the pantheon of mega-saints.) I'm not a big fan of Augustine generally—very smart guy, but way overfull of himself, a quick mind that got more and more arrogant, cranky and authoritarian as he aged, the sort of mainstream-to-MAGA migration that has been typical of my generation. His *Confessions*, for example, a conversion narrative written in his forties, is kind of riotous, often in a good way; his *City of God,* written about 20 years later, is, among other things, a cultish critique of everything Pelagius-related, part of his years-long attempt, finally successful, to get Pelagius excommunicated and to seize control of the destiny of the early church.

Since my heritage is half Irish (my resistant temperament is all Irish!), my spirit is genetically inclined toward a Celtic vision. So I decided to look into this in more detail. I am so glad I did, not just in relation to theological matters, but even more so in relation to the sustainability crises we are facing in the world today, which were in

large measure made inevitable by the Roman Catholic church that emerged between the 4th and 6th centuries, in part via Augustine.

Let me start with basics, which is always, for me, to look at things systemically rather than piecemeal. Western thinking and discourse, as I've said repeatedly, (by contrast with Eastern thinking and discourse) has been afflicted, almost from the outset, by a specific way of orchestrating binary pairs: as oppositional, mutually exclusive, never intermingling, "polar" in the most extreme sense of that word. The foundational code for computing is a very good analogue: 1 is always and only 1, 0 is always and only 0, nothing in between and ne'er the twain shall meet. Eastern systems seem to me to operate more like what they say quantum computers will soon be and do: a continuous spectrum between 1 an 0, either of which can also suddenly become the other. I delineate that difference in more detail in "The Curious Cosmos," so I'll leave it at that for now. I introduce the contrast primarily to indicate that the Western way, which may seem to us to be the "natural" and only way, simply is not. It was a human-created habit of mind that got instilled and then protected and reinforced over many centuries via the considerable investment of historical powerbrokers who, like Augustine and the Roman church, worked mightily to conserve it by repeatedly deeming potentially powerful alternatives, like Pelagius, as heretical.

The concept of heresy as a threat to institutional integrity was in fact pretty much an invention of the early church:

> *The Greek word* hairesis *(from which heresy is derived) was originally a neutral term that signified merely the*

> *holding of a particular set of philosophical opinions. Once appropriated by Christianity however, the term* heresy *began to convey a note of disapproval. The term* heresy *also has been used among Jews, although they have not been as intense as Christians in their punishment of heretics. The concept and combating of heresy has historically been less important in Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam than in Christianity.* (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pelagius-Christian-theologian\)

Again, the East/West divide. This inclination toward disapproval—which over time escalated to intolerance for difference—is almost inevitable in a mindset that is binary and hierarchical in the stereotypical Western manner, the elder Augustine in a nutshell.

I'll use two terms to conceptualize the contrast I want to make in this specific situation, both with long and complex histories in theological and philosophical disputes, almost none of which is of any interest to me here. I use them merely as convenient tropes to indicate how one might answer the question: Are humans born "with God" (i.e., foundationally good, therefore innocent, *a la* Pelagius) or "against God" (i.e., inclined to evil, therefore guilty, *a la* Augustine), the crux of the "Original Sin" part of the argument between Pelagius and Augustine?

Manicheanism (a now-extinct religion founded in the 3rd century by the Parthian prophet Mani) implies the latter, specifically that spirit is God-created and good; material substance (including the human body) is corrupt and evil. In Christian terms, this means that we inherit the stigma

of Adam's sin as a birthright and have no hope of redemption but for the grace of God. As Augustine, with his stereotypical Manichean mind, says, we are by birthright "*massi peccati*," a mess of sin!

Prelapsarianism (a term that came into currency in the 19th century but that I'm going to apply retroactively because it fits the case here better than any term extant at the time) implies the former, arguing that the material world, with us in it, as God's creation, is imbued through and through with godly spirit and is therefore good, all of it, people, things, everything, godly. Evil exists as a consequence of Adam's sin, and we may be tempted toward it, but that is more a matter of misguidance and individual choice than necessity. That's all I want to use these two terms for, convenient boundary markers. There are in fact elements of Manicheanism (its gnostic inclinations regarding acquiring knowledge by direct perception) that are appealing to me. And there are aspects of prelapsarian thought that I'm just not interested in (the implication for example that there was in fact a time before the fall.) But the extremity of their difference provides a perfect template for the analysis that follows here.

Specifically in relation to the 5th century theological argument I'm looking at, these terms establish different genealogical relationships with the original (Judeo-Christian) human man, Adam, and, of course, his equally "original" sin. Augustine focuses on the aftermath of the fall and says we are all spawn of this flawed man, destined to live permanently in the shadow of his malfeasance, which is inherited at birth via the equally profane sexual intercourse that led to our conception. Only God can rectify this aberration, first via Jesus'

pilgrimage to earth and thereafter only via baptism and God's grace, following Paul's quite clear preference for grace, or faith, over good works as the key to salvation.

Pelagius presumes a more Edenic heritage, saying that Adam's corruption, while consequential, was not universally and perpetually damning, leaving considerable room for genuine "free will" in affairs of the human spirit and assigning considerable weight to good works, intentionally performed, as a way to rectify one's relationship with God, a position he turns to Jesus' words to support. We are in effect foundationally "good" from the moment of our conception, making sex sacred rather than profane, only losing our way because of cultural or individual weaknesses. In short, Pelagius believes we are born "with God" Augustine believes "against."

I've put together a list of all the binaries I could think of that derive inevitably from these two foundational positions in relation to original sin and organized them in pairs that seem related to me, for ease of exposition in relation to Pelagius, below. There may be others as well, but whatever they are, the template I'm using applies. As to their ways of constructing and thinking about binaries, a prelapsarian approach (and Pelagius) is biased toward everything on the left side of each backslash, Manicheanism (and Augustine) the right.

1. good/evil; unity/duality
2. light/dark; life/death
3. matriarchy/patriarchy; feminine/masculine
4. community/authority; equity/hierarchy
5. tolerance/orthodoxy; freedom/control
6. love/fear; truth/power

And it's even more extreme than that. For a prelapsarian there is no absolute negation, no "not," between the terms, but a continuous spectrum spanning the extremes. Human agency determines where on that sliding scale one resides. To the extent that any of the "bad" stuff intrudes, it is a consequence of external corruption, weakness, or free choice. For the Manichean there is a hard "not": the spectrum is discontinuous, only extremes, no "between," only an either/or. To the extent that any of the "good" stuff gets into the equation, it is solely and completely as a result of God's grace, which He doles out as, when and to whom he sees fit, all of His machinations beyond both our control and our ken.

Let me go through this set of conceptual categories systematically, focusing on the left sides, the Pelagian side, to suggest how consequential his vision might have been, not just in spiritual terms but in cultural, societal, and historical/material terms, as it pertains to those matters of global crisis and catastrophe currently ongoing. I think you can fill in most of the right side alternatives yourself, by contrast, familiar as they are to our cultural heritage.

good/evil; unity/duality

Pelagius believes that we are of God and with God, end of story: Humankind is born inherently good, and that is universally true, Christian or not. Every human being is of infinite value as an instantiation of the image of God. One of the tropes Pelagius uses is the face of a child, innocent and beautiful, unsullied by any sin, including the stigmatic original one. So, simply, there are no

"others" to fear or hate; we are all one. Any sort of prejudice, including slavery of course, is an abomination, an assault on the godliness intrinsic to our being. As he says:

> *First, then, you ought to measure the good of human nature by reference to its Creator. . . If it is he who has made the world good, exceeding good, how much more excellent do you suppose that he has made humanity . . . fashioned in his image and likeness. . . Learn to appreciate the dignity of human nature.* (Rees, 29).

And further:

> *There are some who call themselves Christians . . . yet perform no Christian actions in their daily lives. There are others who do not call themselves Christians . . . yet perform many Christian actions in their daily lives. Which of those two groups are the better disciples of Christ? Some would say that believing in Christ and worshipping him is what matters for salvation. But this is not what Jesus himself said. His teaching was almost entirely concerned with action, and with the motives which inspire action. . . And if a person can walk along that way without ever knowing the earthly Jesus, then we may say that he is following the spirit of Christ in his heart.* (Van de Weyer, 62)

Two things to note here: Pelagius generally prefers to found his positions on what "Jesus himself said" (Augustine generally prefers Paul's letters.) And Pelagius is instinctively ecumenical in his approach to otherness (Augustine is instinctively xenophobic in his.)

Likewise, nature, everything in it, from the cosmos itself down to the tiniest constituent part, is similarly sacred in his view, a value that was foundational to the Druidic culture that Christianity had been quite amicably merging with over several centuries, absent Roman domination, in the Celtic portions of the British Isles. As he says:

> *There is no creature on earth in whom God is absent . . . God's spirit is present in plants as well. The presence of God's spirit in all living things is what makes them beautiful; and if we look with God's eyes, nothing on the earth is ugly. . . [W]hen Jesus commands us to love our neighbors, he does not only mean our human neighbors, he means all the animals and birds, insects and plants, amongst whom we live.* (Van de Weyer, 71-72)

We are a part of that nature, not its overseers; it is all of a piece, unitary, wholly one, with us in it not above it. The earth is to be savored, cared for, respected, in order to promote life—all of it, flora, fauna, soil, stars, all of it—not to be plundered for wealth or domination. For Augustine and his sponsors, bent on colonization and depredation, no way any of this can stand.

light/dark; life/death

To Pelagius, we are born in the light of innocent love, not in the darkness of sin. And it is life not death that serves as our banner. He prefers the resurrection-inspired imagery derived primarily from John's gospel, not the crucifixion imagery Paul chose in the early days of the church's formation (Augustine's preference.) John's

vision is infused with figures of light and life. His is the story of Word made flesh, embodied, right here and now among us. As I said in "Teaching Secrets," had the banner of the early church been the resurrection rather than the crucifixion, all of this may have been settled already, no need for a tiff between these two titans 400 years hence. Again, of course, given Augustine's preference for Paul and the church's deep investment in his imagery, no way can Pelagius' position be allowed to flourish.

matriarchy/patriarchy; feminine/masculine

For Pelagius, women are both central to and (for the most part) equal partners in the general culture, including church matters. This, too, was a feature of the Celtic tradition, which was, at least originally, moderately matriarchal in certain respects. As is the case with Taoism, similar in this regard, the material cosmos thereby takes on a feminine rather than a masculine aspect, as a womb for creation not an engine for production, a vital, living organism, not an agglomeration of inert raw materials to promote wealth-mongering. Augustine's ally Jerome, now equally revered, uses particularly vile ways of insulting Pelagius for teaching women to read Scripture and participate equitably in religious activities, calling those who chose to study with him "Amazons," literally women without breasts, and deriding Pelagius for discussing the Scriptures with women "among their spindles and wickerwork." Again, Pelagius founds his gender-openness on what Jesus said and did (abridged of course by the culture of his time, one he clearly wanted to question and

change.) It was Paul who started to rein this in considerably, saying in Corinthians 1, for example:

> *Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.* (14:34-35)

Jerome seems to be borrowing from Paul's playbook, taking it down a notch to middle-school bully level.

As a coincident aspect of this, Pelagius was opposed to the idea of mandated celibacy in the clergy, the exclusion of women from clerical roles, and the general attitude that sexuality was inherently corrupt and in need of inhibition. This latter is, of course, a natural consequence of his view that conception was godly, therefore the mechanism that led to it was inherently good. All of that is a very hard ground for patriarchy to take root in, so, again, a non-starter for Augustine and his sponsors.

community/authority; equity/hierarchy

The Celtic culture resembled in its social structures other Indigenous cultures, in that there were few strict class- or caste-related boundaries to enforce status differences among its constituents, who lived in collaborative, relatively equitable communities. Authority was earned and not hierarchized from the top down, creating a sort of primitive democracy rather than an elaborate bureaucracy. Human rights were a given, not a doled-out privilege. This is, again, both for me and for Pelagius,

Jesus' actual message and his practice, which the church did its best to obfuscate almost from the outset, getting more and more diligent in that work over the centuries, this historical instant a momentous turning point along the way. No way "imperialism, white-supremacy, capitalism or patriarchy" can thrive in this milieu. So, a ditto "no" for Augustine and his sponsors.

tolerance/orthodoxy; freedom/control

Since Pelagius believed that godliness was the birthright for every human being, loving respect should be devoted to any and all "others" on the same scale as to oneself and one's own (see the quotation above about the universal goodness of humanity.) This is after all, as Pelagius notes, the inevitable implication of Jesus' "second commandment." There is, in my view (I can't speak for Pelagius, though I expect he'd agree) no more important ethical principal than tolerance. Without it there is an inclination toward chronic hatred, violence, war, genocide, all of it. With it, much of that agenda becomes, if not untenable, at least harder to prosecute. Creating a universally mandated orthodoxy, an obsession during the first millennium of Christian history, is the opposite of all of that. With orthodoxy, there is always an acceptable "in" and an intolerable "out," a distinction enforced by decree, as in excommunication or exile, both of which Pelagius endured during his later years. Freedom is inevitably subordinated to control, which is the keynote of all authoritarian regimes. As the church moved deeper and deeper into the Roman culture, that became its status quo, and Augustine was a master-

manipulator of the levers of power on both sides of that equation.

love/fear; truth/power

The argument between these two men comes down, for me, to what the Jesus meant by his "new covenant." I believe it is one based on more love and less fear rather than vice-versa. I'd say Pelagius agreed, though he never says this specifically. One thing he does say is that canonical doctrine is the product of men and not the inviolable word of God:

> *You will realize that doctrines are inventions of the human mind, as it tries to penetrate the mystery of God. You will realize that Scripture itself is the work of human minds, recording the example and teaching of Jesus. Thus, it is not what you believe that matters; it is how you respond with your heart and your actions. It is not believing in Christ that matters; it is becoming like him.* (Van de Weyer, 48)

In this context, individual enterprise—what I've described variously earlier as "direct perception" or "personal contemplation"—is, therefore not just allowable but mandatory. Doctrine cannot simply be inhaled from authoritative sources; it must be instilled from one's embodied presence in the world, one's habits of thought and action, seamlessly from the inside out. This takes a lot of time and effort of course. So much simpler just to take orders from on high without question, which is Augustine's agenda, at least as I read his later writings. Pelagius' position on this, founded on Jesus'

words, is stunning, enough by itself it seems to me for the now fully-institutionalized Church with its authoritative orthodoxy—the Bible as the word of God—to declare him a heretic.

So, take your pick. I know what mine is and has always been, instinctively. I had hardly heard of Pelagius until a few weeks ago. I've been absorbing his work obsessively in the meantime. One of his basic tenets is that we are endowed with an idea of the good from birth. What we need to do is reflect inward, study, contemplate. When all of that is done with a good spirit and open heart we will instinctively choose the right path.

If you are looking for an ideal historical prototype for "speaking truth to power," you'd be hard-pressed to find a better one than this. Augustine is relentless, understanding he has the upper hand in this power dynamic; Pelagius persists in his positions, defending himself again and again, when given the opportunity, quite effectively (if overly cleverly in some critics eyes), "winning" several of the cases brought against him, never fully retracting, even after his exile and excommunication. He's a very cool guy, in both senses of the word.

I hope you can now see that the extremity of my initial claim about what was at stake was not exaggerated. And that you can extrapolate for yourself how, had it gone Pelagius' way, Western culture might not have colonized the world, sometimes genocidally, nor plundered it through to the currently ongoing 6th great extinction, one that may include humanity if we don't change our ways.

5.

I've had two dreams over the last week or so, relatively short and focused, most likely provoked by the spiritual meditation book I'm reading piecemeal at bedtime, the one I mentioned in "The Time Has Come." They didn't seem particularly consequential when I woke from them, so I didn't take note of them. Despite that, for some reason, I remembered them when I woke the following morning. So I've been thinking about them in the meantime, trying to decode what might be enough at stake in them to keep them in my waking inventory.

The one I had last night involved me, Carol and my father (both now passed.) My father was well into his 90s and quite infirm. Carol and I were helping him navigate a way down a street, one on each side of him. It was snowy, kind of slushy, but everything was fine until we hit a patch of black ice. We stopped suddenly to avoid falling and somehow my father slipped from our grasp and skidded along for about 10 feet before falling. His head snapped back with the fall, hitting hard ground, and he landed in a big puddle, deep enough to cover most of his face. We rushed up to keep him from drowning, picked him up and started to walk back where we had come from. My father was wobbly, like a wet pretzel, so that was a chore, but as far as we could tell, and quite surprisingly to us, this event hadn't been terminal for him. I had a strained relationship with my father, so I assumed this was merely another mini-story about all of that.

A few days ago I had a similarly brief dream, vignette-like in the same way, about working out the next term's teaching assignments with the English Department's chief

administrative assistant when I was a Program Director back in the 80s. The Composition Program was huge, over 200 sections with more than 100 mostly part-time and graduate student instructors teaching them. These meetings with her would go on for a couple of hours. I'd come in with a tentative schedule, she'd review it and make changes, then she'd start making phone calls to see who would fit (and agree to) teaching what, where and when. There was constant negotiation along the way, switching people around, changing assigned courses, everything. In the end, we always came up with a fully staffed schedule amenable (roughly) to everyone. During the 5 years I did this with her, we never once ended up with an unstaffed class or made a mistake of consequence, which was, I thought even back then, a miracle. On top of that, we had a blast in these meetings. That might sound hard to believe, but she was such an extraordinary person, direct, honest, persuasive, great wit and sense of humor, it was a delight really to spend time both working with her and witnessing, with astoundment, what she was capable of doing.

What I thought for the first time after waking up the next morning was that she was not only one of my favorite all-time colleagues, but was truly a genius, I mean a stunningly brilliant person, smarter and more capable than any of my colleagues, or me. And the apex of her career trajectory was a staff position (what were called "secretaries" back then) in an English Department. I understood even back then that this was a function of gender and class bias. But that was as far as my thinking went. Until today.

I've been writing for a couple of weeks now about two of the most extreme patriarchies in Western history, the

Roman Empire and the Catholic Church. It suddenly struck me that both of these dreams pertain to the pernicious effects of patriarchy; in the first, the extraordinary amount of energy it takes to keep an aged and hobbling "patriarch" on his feet; in the second, the profound and shameful effect that has had on the women who are actually doing all the work, held back and held down by eons of bias instilled by the very cultural institutions, including the church, that should be countering it. In other words, bell hooks in a nutshell.

So what ultimately happened to Pelagius and Pelagianism? He had moved to Rome, most likely from Wales, in 380 CE, becoming more and more prominent (mostly via his much more social follower Caelestius) in the theological arguments ongoing there as Christianity continued its transition into a state religion. This struggle to establish a commonly agreed-upon orthodoxy for the church involved many decisions about what was going to be in or out, sanctioned or heretical. The council of Nicaea in 325 (before Pelagius' time) was an opening gesture in this regard, seeking to settle, among other things, the question about Jesus' divinity by dismissing the Arian "heresy," and creating the Nicene Creed the church uses to this day. The Council of Carthage in 397 (which Pelagius was surely aware of) settled many of the extant questions and conflicts about the biblical canon, what would be in or out.

Augustine, while initially beneficent toward, or at least tolerant of Pelagius, became more and more aggressive in his attacks. He mounted several unsuccessful synodal "cases" against Pelagius between 414 and 418. When one of his cases, before Pope Zosimus, failed, he went "over his head" to the Roman emperor Honorius, who had

Pelagius exiled for "disturbing the peace," of all things. A subsequent appeal to Zosimus at the Council of Carthage in 418 resulted in Pelagius' excommunication, the final victory Augustine had been pressing for years to achieve. Once again, at the Council of Ephesus in 431, Pelagianism was repudiated as heretical. Many subsequent councils and synods have had to reiterate that position. A Google search will lead you to any number of continuing contemporary critiques of "the Pelagian heresy" which gives you an idea of how durable and appealing his vision was and still is in many Christian communities around the world, and how much of a threat it has always posed to the sort of "imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalistic patriarchy" the church prefers as its identity.

The fact that Pelagius' works were declared heretical excised them of course from the Church canon. Some parts of his work have survived intact, others via quotations from it in Augustine's various critiques, ironically. What happened to him after 418 is unclear. Some sources list that as the year of his death. Other suggest he lived until 430, returning to Ireland, which remained an outpost far enough beyond the reach of Rome, as well as an inherently stubborn culture devoted to a foundational vision amenable to Pelagius. From there, he was said to have continued to publish, using the pseudonyms of Jerome and Augustine, his primary antagonists, to reach a wider audience. If that's true, I give him extra credit for his persistence, his continued resistance, and his brilliant sense of humor.

6.

Any number of what might seem like extraneous factors contributed, in my view, to the intensity of Augustine's attacks on Pelagius. Part of his obsession I would argue (though I've seen no other sources suggest this) derives from his personal history, that dramatic "conversion" in his 30s from profligacy to celibacy recorded in his *Confessions*. He reminds me of Paul in this regard, a fanatic one way who became a fanatic the other way all of a sudden, the perfect embodiment of what I said above about the Western habit of mind in relation to binaries. This extreme or that, no between, which becomes a template for his arguments about the centrality of original sin in human identity, our "born-against God" nature, redemption possible only via His grace. How else to explain how someone with his pedigree could have been so profligate? I suspect Augustine felt, looking back, that his excesses were inevitable, the result of endemic rather that personal flaws. And since many of Augustine's "sins" were sexual, he sees sexuality as not just a portal toward evil but inherently evil in itself, the means in fact by which evil is redistributed generationally.

There are also, in my view, certain "mother" issues at play for him. His mother was (the now saint) Monica, who prayed devotedly (weeping nightly according to some legends) for years that her wayward son might be redeemed. Augustine devotes significant portions of his Confessions to various kinds of encomia for his mother. This is the opposite face, culturally, of patriarchy, "putting women on a pedestal" while stigmatizing sex and sexuality, a Catholic variation on the Oedipus complex. Augustine's argument with Pelagius becomes a

template to translate this autobiographical eccentricity into theology, the personal becoming universal.

Pelagius on the other hand was through and through, as best I can tell, a "with God" kind of guy, always a combiner and a mediator, specifically blending Christian ideology with the native Druidic values of his homeland, which cherished human life and nature as inherently godly, all quite compatible with Jesus' teachings if not with what was made of them later. There is, of course, a duality in this thinking, but never an either/or. I have been able to find little information about his personal or family history (the fate of many heresiarchs, always under erasure.)

Another contextual factor amplifying this argument had to do with power, state power, the ongoing colonizing power of the Roman empire, all of which got incorporated into Christianity via Constantine's conversion early in the 4th century. Subtending, in the deep background, is the long, dark history of bad blood, literally, between the Celtic and Roman cultures, which competed for dominance in Europe during the last half of the first millennium BCE, a history punctuated early on by the Celtic sacking of Rome in 387 BCE and finally by Caesar's victory over the Celtic armies at the Battle of Alesia in 52 BCE. Since the Celts left no written records of their history, philosophy (primarily Druidism), or literature, their story ended up being told by their vanquishing enemies (never the best way to show your good side), including Julius Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*, the source for some of the more outlandish claims about the brutality of their warriors and their practice of ritual sacrifice (for which there is some contested

archeological evidence), this from the man whose strategy for "civilizing" these "Barbarians" was essentially genocide followed by enslavement, with an occasional crucifixion thrown in for good measure. So I'm inclined to read most of this more as propaganda than history.

And there is a more immediate and local power dynamic in play as well, in the person of Augustine, a significant player as the Roman church consolidated its orthodoxy in the 4th and 5th centuries, whose positions melded perfectly with the newly minted state religion that Christianity had become. Winning his determined battle against Pelagius was as urgent for him to cement his authority in that system as it was for the church to secure its state-related identity going forward. In that respect he plays a role much like Paul's in the 1st century, and toward many of the same ends. Augustine turns to Paul over and over to support his critique of Pelagius. Which is to say, as I see it at least, that Paul's legacy casts a long shadow over this whole process. In the simplest terms, if you buy all of Paul, then Augustine's position is inevitable. And he'd have no choice but to prosecute this case to the utmost.

7.

As you might guess, if I'm willing to entertain the notion that Jesus was not the Son of God, I'm certainly willing to entertain the notion that Paul's letters might be the works of a flawed man not missives air-mailed from a perfect God. Pelagius says as much about all of Scripture in that passage I quoted above, a stunning move! When it comes to what should be what in doctrinal terms, I, like

Pelagius, prefer to rest on what Jesus actually said, and my ears hear it as much more mysterious and multi-valent than Paul's ears apparently did.

I've already indicated in "Teaching Secrets" several of my complaints about how Paul's ears hear Jesus. The two I'd like to say a bit more about here, because I think they are pertinent, are the "faith vs. good works" conundrum and the role of predestination in relation to the distribution of God's grace. As I said, Paul comes down hard on the side of faith, indicating that salvation is available to us only via the grace of God, not by what we do or how we live. This is not a necessary or inevitable derivative from Jesus' teaching, as James (back at the outset), Pelagius later, and me in both "Teaching Secrets" and now are happy to point out. Pelagius begins with the presumption that we are not born with the affliction of original sin. We do not, therefore, need to be redeemed or restored via the happenstance of God's grace. What we need to do is lead a good life, guided by the very reliable inner lights we were born with. Good works are the ticket to happiness both personally and communally, and to salvation as well.

This is, of course, impossible in Augustine's system, where no such reliable inner lights come as standard equipment. Our only hope is that God will intervene—as he did, of course, with both Paul and him—with redemptive grace. Thus the need for faith. Since you can't get there on your own, just hope and pray God steps in kindly on your behalf. My guess is Pelagius was never a "bad boy" like Paul and Augustine so can't imagine why you'd need godly intervention just to wake up! That's all I'll say here about the faith/good works

problem, which I commented on in "Teaching Secrets." Suffice it to say I'm totally with Pelagius on this one.

Paul's letters are, then, a significant contextual factor in this argument. Pelagius, as I said, generally prefers to quote Jesus to support his positions; Augustine, Paul. Interestingly, Pelagius wrote a book-length commentary on Paul's letters which, given his heretical status, was largely suppressed at the time and is very hard to come by now. [I've seen parts of it, other parts are available only at exorbitant prices because they are out of print, and there are some intact, extant copies in European libraries.] Since this book is not central to my argument, I am sanguine with this caesura in my documentation, except to say that Augustine apparently began his campaign against Pelagius after reading how Pelagius interpreted this passage from Paul's letter to the Romans:

> *Therefore, as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death passed unto all men, for that all sinned* . . . (Romans 5:12)

. . . on the basis of which Pelagius concludes "that children do not carry original sin." And there it is: children do not carry original sin, which is anathema to Augustine. Let the battle commence! How Pelagius derived that conclusion from Paul's letter is hard to fathom. Even to me he seems to be saying the exact opposite. But I admire his chutzpa! [For a more extensive commentary on this see: https://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/expositor/series7/03-455.pdf

As to predestination: Carol and I joined many different kinds of churches when our kids were young, trying

unsuccessfully to find one amenable to us. It was in one of the more conservative protestant churches that I first encountered a full-force presentation of Paul's concept of predestination, one that stunned and distressed me. I've done some reading in the meantime, and for this essay also, on what all this is and means. I just finished reading, for example, online, a treatise on Paul's position on predestination. Here's the link if you're interested: https://medium.com/the-liturgical-legion/paul-and-predestination-7b20c67f9758. I can't say I understand any of it. One needs a divinity degree just to process the layers and complexities. It is the epitome of "Jesuitical!" I went to college at a Jesuit school, and I'm very well-versed in what that sounds like, know it when I see it. So I'm going to skip that analysis. I'll take a page from Pelagius workbook and see if I can figure some of it out for myself.

The author of the text I just mentioned writes commentaries on the three passages from Paul's letters in which he uses the word predestination: Romans 8:28–30, Ephesians 1:4–11, and 1 Corinthians 2:7. Since both Pelagius and Augustine argue specifically about what Paul said in Romans, I'll start with that one, quoting also two verses that immediately precede the ones noted:

> *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.*
>
> *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his*

> *purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the first born among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.* (Romans 8:26-30)

I guess I'm less interested right now in what this all means in theological terms than in how it gets used in institutional and cultural terms. One of the sermons I remember from the church I mentioned, the preacher using the over-the-top fire and brimstone rhetoric that seemed to be indigenous to the denomination, basically said, to my ear, "God created a book before time that included all the names of those who would be saved. If you're here among us, you're one of them. There may be many others. But there are others who are not in that book and are doomed." Who got in and who got left out seemed to me to be a matter of unfathomable happenstance. Now Paul is not that stupid, but his whirligig rhetoric around this matter certainly lends itself to many similar kinds of prideful, xenophobic discriminations.

As to the text, the first verse says that we are weak, unable even to pray on our own initiative, have to wait for those Spirit-induced groans to get us going. What's up with that? The next verse says that whoever is searching our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit which intercedes in accordance with God's will. I can see why Paul, Augustine, and the church in general would promote this. But there's an element of ventriloquism here, of passive helplessness, that is just unappealing to me. I prefer Pelagius' approach: meditate, think it through, follow your own best lights, and put it into practice. The

next two verses set up the relationship between God's calling and his foreknowing who would be conformed to the image of his Son. The final verse seals the deal, a *tour de force* that sounds fantastic but makes little sense to me. Except for the repetition of "those," which draws the boundaries. I'm still not sure how to get into that group of "those" who will be saved, or even if I would have any say about that. But it seems clear by implication that there are also "those" who will inevitably be on the outs. Or at least that's how that passage seems to me often to get used. Most likely, in the church I was sitting in listening to that sermon, had the preacher known I was Catholic he might have considered me one of them. Pelagius is a "we're all in" kind of guy, a welcomer. I like that. Augustine sounds to me like "I'm surely in, you probably aren't, but let's see how it goes" kind of guy. A gatekeeper.

This mandates the missionary zeal that animates Christians to spread the "good new" to all the benighted lost souls out there, getting them on board. At the extreme, it also justifies all manner of violence, oppression, colonization, even genocide in the process: "Either knuckle under or I'll kill you," that sort of thing. I don't like that. For a congregation that endured exactly that kind of persecution for 300 years, this seems to be the height of self-contradictory hypocrisy, conversion as revenge!

The other passage I'll comment on is a little more straightforward, from Ephesians. I'll go a few verses beyond those above-mentioned, again for context that is helpful to me.

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:4-14)

Here again you have the "chosen" "before the creation of the world," those "predestined" for redemption before even time began, "marked . . . with a seal" so they will be the ones assured of "unity . . . under Christ" after the apocalypse, I assume, that the Book of Revelation will describe in detail some 60 years later. The rest of us can go to hell in a handcart I suppose. And that's all I'll say about that.

Finally, as it pertains to these contextual matters, while Rome may have been in its late-empire stage, it was empire-oriented nonetheless, preoccupied with colonizing and maintaining its self-serving patriarchal status in the world. That cultural privilege required a very pragmatic attitude toward the "available resources" the world affords. Specifically, empires instinctively operate on the assumption that the earth and its various peoples are "assets" that can be "mined" to accumulate wealth and sustain dominance. In other words, they are—earth and people—commodities to be utilized and controlled. In a culture that purports, top-down, that everything is godly, the very thought that these potential assets may be "with God" by birthright, endowed in their nature with heavenly spirit, is an intolerable threat to the economy of the system. Better to imagine that everything else out there is already "fallen" and needs to be redeemed, by conversion if possible, by violence if necessary, and then put to use in service of the master-colonizer, than to imagine that godliness is freely granted to all "others," including nature, each and all of value equal to the colonizer. The history of the Catholic church in general during the first millennium is a sort of scary/comical see-saw power scrum between church and state, popes and emperors, interlopers and imposters, struggling always to assert dominance, more like a multi-century Netflix docudrama than an orderly procession toward the good.

8.

What does any of this have to do with waking up, you, and my inner-skeptical apostle, might legitimately be asking? Well, first of all, literally, I just woke up, after a

series of several other wakings-up during what is a typical night for me. So I'll start there, with the series of dreams I actually got up to write about in sequence.

Here's the first one, which I woke from at 11:58:

> *I was involved with a small community of people who were moving to a new location. The move was in its final stages so everything was in disarray. Many adults were scurrying around haphazardly.*
>
> *There was a young boy in the scene about 5 looking for his pet bird, a beautiful, lime green, hummingbird-type creature I had just seen a few minutes previously perched on a street sign right behind the truck we were loading, which had apparently backed up, the sign now lying on the ground. The bird was nowhere in sight. I was trying to figure out what I was going to say to the boy who was getting more and more frantic in his search. I was quite sure the bird had escaped safely, but I'd have to persuade the boy of that, no easy matter given all the agitation, including his.*
>
> *The lives of the adults in the scene were obviously in disarray, all rushing about cluelessly. Several details indicated that everyone was sleeping around, or wishing they were, with people other than their partners, including my partner and me. I wanted to be with someone else; the woman I was with, apparently married to, wanted to be with someone else, too; she was actually calling out other men's names in her sleep, one of them that of my best friend in high school, a futural version of the relationship I reported on in "The Time Has Come."*

When I came out into the kitchen to write this up the floor was flooded with luminous moonlight. Stunning! I

went to the window and saw the full moon, the first one I've seen for a while because of all the cloudiness this spring. I knew if I stayed with it too long I'd lose the dream, so I sat down to write. By the time I finished writing the above notes, just a few minutes, the light was gone! I was crestfallen, thinking I should have stopped to watch the light, revel in it. Instead I frittered away that precious time to write some sketchy, scattered notes about an unpleasant dream.

I felt depressed and stupid for using my time so pointlessly when I could have been looking at moonlight on my kitchen floor. So I stopped, shut off the computer and its sidelight, and headed back to bed. On my way to the bedroom I could see the light beginning to reemerge on the floor. All it needed was darkness to return! As my eyes acclimated to the faint light, it shimmered brighter and brighter, all the plants and windowsill items I have over there repeated in shadows on the floor. It was stunning once more! So I got my rocking chair from the dining room, brought it in, and sat for about 20 minutes to watch that bright image migrate across the floor, restored to sanity by the grace of some god or my own soul.

Which leads, surprisingly to me, to last night's spiritual reading from the little book my sister-in-law gave me. It was titled "Who Is Really Sane?" in which the author basically summarizes the plot of the 1966 movie starring Alan Bates, one of Carol's favorite actors, called "The King of Hearts." Bates plays a soldier trying to escape from the Nazis who are overrunning the town, some of them searching for him. He inadvertently enters an asylum to hide, dresses up as a patient, and evades their notice. All the patients then escape to the streets, declare

him their king, and parade about in flamboyant costumes while Nazis sack the town. A pretty good illustration of the problem of recognizing "right-mindedness" I wrote about "The Time Has Come."

Right after I went back to bed, I recalled vividly an experience of this sort I had about 7 years ago. A friend of mine, in fear of self-harm, had committed herself to a local mental hospital. I decided to pay her a visit, assuming it would be like any other hospital, walk in, talk, that sort of thing. I picked some daffodils from my garden and headed off. When I got to the front desk, I was told to empty all my pockets of everything, wallet, phone, keys, everything, and leave it there. The security guard looked over the flowers suspiciously but let me keep them. When I got to the floor she was housed on, I was required to remove all my clothes down to underwear and socks, put them in a locker, without a lock, and don a set of flimsy hospital scrubs. I was buzzed into the ward through a security door, still holding my flowers. A nurse immediately took them and said she would release them to my friend after she checked them out. She actually said that one might house a pen to help a patient self-harm!

For a few minutes I just wandered among the "inmates" in this portion of the unit who were milling about placidly, like a surrealistic dream, while another nurse went in search of my friend. I was dressed exactly like them so they smiled at me, said hi, etc., I replied, very pleasant. One young man was standing at another security door, a young woman on the other side. They were smiling delightedly. Each had a hand pressed to the window glass, as if they were holding one another's. When I finally got to talk with my friend in what they

told me was "a private room," though I didn't believe it, I told her the people I had just met were the sanest people I'd encounter all day. When we finished, the nurse allowed me to leave—you have no idea how vulnerable you feel in a setting like that with no wallet or phone to prove you don't belong—I got redressed, collected my pocket things at the front desk (the attendant asked me some tough questions about a little case I carried with my migraine pills in it, as if they might be illegal drugs or suicide pills.) But he gave it back and I left for work. The people I met up on the 11th floor that day were, in fact, the sanest people I met all that day.

All of this seems to me to have something to do with the strange way I write. When I'm in one of my writing "waves," which generally last a month or so, I spend so much of my time in a chaotic, liminal space between dreaming and waking, trying to get it all down, done, finished. I've been in that state of agitation for days now, trying to finish this essay, my spirit seemingly taken over from the outside in, telling me not what to think or say, but just what to type up, as if it's already done and needs simply to be recorded. Sometimes, like tonight during that interim when I believed I had squandered the moonlight, this feels like a monumental waste of time. My readership is microscopically small, I am exhausted and not "myself." Who is sane in this picture?

Well, all I can say now, having written through this momentary crisis of faith, is that I have in me, always, a carefree little boy with a beautiful bird. Sometimes in the chaos of all the moving parts of life, that bird has to fly off to be safe and the boy is in a dither. Sooner or later, though, I know things will calm down and we will be reunited. Amazingly, tonight, I was lucky enough both to

finish the writing I wanted to do—which is never a waste of time, never, I know in my heart if not in my head, even if no one ever reads it but me—and to sit for a while with the moon. William Blake has a tandem of poems called "The Little Boy Lost" and "The Little Boy Found." Content-wise they have no obvious connection to that half-hour interlude in my kitchen. But, like me, what they have in common is the little boy, who can only be found if I let him get lost for a while. And that's a part of what I have to say to my inner-skeptical-apostle about why I go about things in such a roundabout way: It's the lost and found part that makes it all worthwhile.

Here's the second dream I woke to record at 2:20 AM:

> *I just woke up with the sound of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" from his 9th symphony being played on a church organ inside my head. This essay, this book, is almost over, I'm sure of it now. I feel calmly happy, about to be released from the mania of thinking to return to my absent-minded daily gladness, just walking and seeing. It's the second time I woke up tonight, not unusual for me. The first was just before midnight, a much more chaotic and unpleasant dream in tatters in my memory. I wanted so much to get down its details, but they kept shattering and scattering like dropped glass. The opposite of happily calm. A few hours ago I felt my life was such a waste, all this writing almost no one reads, a head that can't keep still. Now I think I'm the luckiest man in the world, moonlight on the kitchen floor, Beethoven's 9th, all this writing I get to reread, just one night's gifts. Today I'll walk in the forest again, do my chores, see Bridget and her dog Sadie whom I'll watch while Bridget does her chores, just one day's gifts, the inside of my head adazzle with nothing but sparkling light, awake, grateful, waiting to sleep again. As you know if you've read*

my <u>In Dreams</u> I have many nights that go that way dream-wise, always in the same direction, distress to calm. As Coleridge says, "Sleep, it is a gentle thing . . ." Well at least for me that's the direction it prefers to move, toward the gentle. I'll go back to sleep now, let it take me the rest of the way home.

And that's the next thing I have to say to my inner-skeptical-apostle: There is always serene and joyful moonlight, sooner or later, always. Sometimes it is masked out for a while by all the light it takes to do one's essential work. That doesn't mean it's gone and won't return. It will and does, in an ode to joy. Just like that little bird.

Here's the third dream I woke to record, at 4:25 AM:

I just woke up from a long dream. I can't remember any of it except the last scene. I'm sitting alone at a table in a restaurant. I'm wearing a white shirt open at the neck and blue jeans. The server has just left me the bill for my meal. The table is otherwise empty, having already been cleared. A man maybe half my age walks over and sits at a table about 8 feet across from mine. He asks me, almost challengingly, "When are you ever happy, tell me, when are you ever happy?" I thought for a moment and told him "I'm happy right now, as happy as I ever was. I might not look that way to you. But you haven't seen what I've seen, you haven't done what I've done" (as if those things were almost beyond comprehension). "I am just happy right now to be here and to be me. I wish the same for you." I slipped out my wallet to pay the bill. Then I woke up.

And there it all is, life, at least mine, in summation. You eat your meal, alone if necessary, enjoy it, and pay your

bill. Simple as that. And that's what my roundabout story of last night's excitement means, told straight, mr. inner-skeptical-apostle. Satisfied? I am, for sure.

9.

And finally, to return to my overall theme in these wisdom-text essays, how does all of this pertain to the "ears to hear" business I have been trying to translate over to the process of reading texts that purport to mask their secrets?

Clearly, even the smartest readers often cannot agree on what such texts "mean." Pelagius and Augustine, for example, come to exactly opposite conclusions about so many of the texts they read, and on matters of utmost import. It doesn't matter to me ultimately which one larger institutional forces decide is heretical and which is orthodox. That is merely a diurnal matter of conserving privilege and power, nothing to do with truth.

These are two smart men, so what takes them down such different roads? Surprisingly to me, I'm inclined to think there is a sort of "predestination" at work here, not one enforced deifically from the outside in but ethically from the inside out, readerly preconceptions that are difficult to become conscious of but that orient a reader quite powerfully in one direction or another, everything thereafter following along like a slithering snake follows its head.

I'll start with those two binary inclinations I wrote about at the outset, polar or spectrum, Manichean and

prelapsarian, "black and white or read all over," to use a variation on that old joke about a newspaper. One way or the other, our "ears to hear" have been pre-set for us by such structural assumptions about how "reality" is constituted systemically. The only question is whether that has been indoctrinated from the outside-in or self-induced from the inside-out. If it's the former, we are at the mercy of whatever authority we have indentured ourselves to, and those preconditions will remain largely invisible to us. If it's the latter, we can retain at least a semblance of awareness of and control over what they are, how they are skewing things, so we can regulate to some extent how they reveal or interfere with what we're trying to fathom. It is even, I truly believe, with an exertion of will, possible to suspend them temporarily, a variation on what Coleridge calls the "willful suspension of disbelief," to open our ears enough to hear not what came before, but what is coming now. That is the ultimate state of being awake. I may have a much harder time entering that state when I have a text in front of me than when I'm walking in the forest among living things. But it's something I aspire to every time I believe a text or an author or another person is wise enough for me to invest all that energy to open my ears to hear.

Much of this preconditional influence derives from one's cultural heritage, of course. The Celtic world constructed its relationship with Christianity on the basis of the left sides of all those binaries I examined above. The Roman world with the right. And as I said, ne'er the twain shall meet. Pelagius by all accounts was a simple, private, quiet soul whose vision of goodness was grounded in universal love and tolerance for others, all of that, I believe, preceding his reading of scripture. How could he see it otherwise and remain true to himself? As it happens,

Jesus lends himself, at least in terms of what he actually says, to that sort of reading. Augustine was by all accounts a brilliant, flamboyant, aggressive intellectual, convinced of his rectitude, which was fully supported by "the powers that be" in his moment on the stage. Terms like intractable and intolerant come to mind to describe this type of disposition, with which I'm quite familiar given my lifetime in the academy. How could he see it otherwise and remain himself? As it happens, Paul lends himself ideally to that sort of reading. I have enough of Augustine's Paul in my own inner Paul to know how tempting that path is. So I have worked mightily for a lifetime, via my love of poetry primarily, to instill enough of Pelagius in my Paul to properly guide my first steps, inviting (rather than demanding) a text to open a gentle, lovely and unpredictable readerly path for me, akin to the one I am now, having finally finished this essay, about to head out to walk along for a while, winding through the forest at Woodard Bay, my favorite spot, where I am much more likely to find company like Pelagius—those trees reaching— than Augustine—my head swirling. See ya'.

When You Make the Two One

1.

I've always had an interest in the "lost gospels" and thought I'd finish up this wisdom-text sequence with a closer look at my favorite among them, the Gospel of Thomas, a small part of the Nag Hammadi cache of 13 mostly gnostic texts unearthed in Egypt in 1945 by workers digging for fertilizer. They had been buried there together most likely early in the 4th century to secure their survival in the aftermath of an anathemizing letter from Bishop Athanasius during the period of ultra-consolidation precipitated by the Romanization of the church under Constantine. If you're interested primarily in what Jesus actually said and nothing more, as I am, this gospel is the motherlode, a series of 114 of his aphoristic "sayings" and parables—"the hidden words that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote them down"—without any narrative to connect them or authorial commentary. I chose this gospel because it presents a version of Jesus that, to me, is even closer to the one Pelagius' ears are trying to hear in the New Testament gospels of his era. By that time, Gnosticism had been pretty much eradicated, and very few if any of the Gnostic Gospels were still in currency.

Gnosticism is a term that was applied retroactively—primarily to name it as a heresy—for an assortment of quite common approaches to the practice of Christianity during the first and second century. The early church was, as I've said, a loose confederation of pod-like communities struggling to maintain cohesion in the chaotic aftermath of Jesus' execution, what I've called a dis-organized religion,

vibrant, diverse, generative. Many of the early Christians were illiterate, relying on oral traditions and practices founded on a wide variety of newly minted "gospels," only four which were ultimately legitimized as the New Testament staples, the remainder surgically excised from the canon primarily via the heresy route.

It took several centuries for what we now take for granted as a Christian orthodoxy, and the approved version of the Bible, to fully take hold, a process of "organization" that was quite brutal at times, at least as it pertains to this dazzling array of foundational textual material. Scholars estimate that as much as 85% of early Christian writing was "lost," a benign way to describe what was an intentional, Florida-style book-banning process on steroids designed to homogenize the array of sometimes-competing alternatives into a single coherent canon. As is always the case with history, the winners get to tell the authoritative story. The losers' voices languish, recede to the margins, or more likely disappear entirely into the silence of lostness. On rare, lucky occasions, though, remnants of those voices are later found, as this trove of lost gospels was, including the Gospel of Thomas, my primary subject here.

Since Gnosticism was, in my view, largely constructed by the Roman church as a means of vilifying these early texts, I'll generally use the term "lost" to name the source material I'm writing about here. When I use the term gnostic, it will be with a small "g," to point broadly at an approach to life that is founded on the everyday meaning of the Greek term *gnosis*, self-generated knowledge, absent all the other hocus-pocus often associated with what came to be called Gnosticism. As Jesus says succinctly and cogently to Thomas in this regard:

(5) *Jesus said, "Recognize what is in your sight, and that which is hidden from you will become plain to you. For there is nothing hidden which will not become manifest."*

The lost gospels, most likely written between the late 1st and early 3rd centuries, while the Christian community was still abundantly diverse in quite salutary ways, privileged individual enterprise, akin to the "direct perception" or "contemplation" I've already described, and not externally imposed guidance or universal, authoritative orthodoxy as the path to what Jesus calls the kingdom of God, which is not a function primarily of "Mind," *a la* Hermes, or of "Nature," *a la* Buhner. Neither of those categories remains any longer as a distinct entity; it is always-both, or maybe more accurately no-longer-either (like the way I describe my "ecstatic" experiences while I'm walking in the woods), prefiguring many of the values and tendencies I outlined in my discussion of Pelagius. The lost gospels are commensurate with Pelagius in other ways as well: They are more gender-equitable than the canonical texts, and dramatically more so than the church Augustine was defending. Most of Jesus' disciples are male, but there are also women present and active in these gospels, and they generally have the same status and authority in the community as the men do. Jesus listens to them, likes them, and respects them. Imagery of light dominates over darkness. And the figure of the child is ubiquitous, reminiscent to me of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, children everywhere.

As to my method: I read a couple of books that proffer readings of Jesus' sayings, including those in the Gospel of

Thomas, and I consulted a variety of online sources. But I made it a point in the process not to be swayed by their interpretive inclinations, which might then begin to serve as an alternative orthodoxy to the canonical one I have been striving so hard to avoid. I have all along here preferred to trust my own inner bearings, using what I've named as a quasi-poetic approach to these texts, my unique strength as a reader.

As I said, I am neither a scholar nor a theologian, and I have no interest in engaging with conversations or arguments about the merits of my interpretations of these passages in those larger arenas. My readerly preference has always been to tune my own ears until they hear the mysteries and secrets that authors claim reside in their wisdom-texts, all toward developing an ethical platform suited precisely to me, eccentric as that might be. If you disagree with my readings—and I hope you will—you are already on your way toward developing an ethical platform of your own, based on what your ears hear, which is clearly what this Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas warrants, even demands.

The Gospel of Thomas was composed somewhere between 60 and 250 C.E. and may have relied on a still-lost original document (perhaps the one referred to among Biblical scholars as "Q") available also to the Synoptic Gospelists, in that some of its parables appear in roughly similar form in those texts as well. There is no way to verify, of course, that these are even accurate, let alone verbatim records of what Jesus actually said. But what my "ears hear" in this one is an authenticity of voice that I'm inclined to trust, one I believe is as close to what Jesus actually said as is possible now to find (which is pretty

much all I care about ethically) even if absolute accuracy is an impossibility.

I consulted five translations of Thomas' gospel, choosing in the end to rely almost entirely on the Lambdin translation (which, if not the most scholarly, is quite straightforward), except for one example I take from the Noah edition for its gender neutrality. I'll indicate that one after the passage. Everything else is from Lambdin. Before each passage is its standard number in the gospel sequence. I organized my readings under the four basic thematic patterns that seem by their ongoing recurrences to be at the heart of the message of this gospel, at least as it speaks to me: the figure of the child, the trope of inside/outside (and above/below), the male/female gender conundrum, and the collapse of binary thinking, the two-into-one motif, thus my title.

2.

every day
find some
little way
to become

what you were
before you
knew boy
from girl

here from
there now
from before
from after

that leaf say
swaying down
to settle
at your feet

the tiny bird
you just heard
from a twig
overhead

its bit of song
flirting with
the tip of
a curved beak

strong enough
to lift you
to the clouds
and carry you

as far away
as it takes
to become
who you were

before you made
all those other yous
the world expects
you to display

every moment
of the day except
(if you say so)
this one

I wrote this poem about six months ago during the 2022 holiday season, many months before I started writing this book or thinking about the waking up business that is at its heart. I was taking photos of various window displays downtown to use for a YouTube slideshow I wanted to make with my rendition "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" as the soundtrack. In the lower left corner of one of the storefronts was a small, hand-painted graphic of a very young child, wide-eyed—couldn't tell girl or boy—wearing a dinosaur outfit, only their face showing. I didn't really think through in any detail what was so captivating about this image, but when I got home I wrote the poem.

Last night I was rereading the gospel of Thomas and came across this passage:

> (22) *Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to his disciples, "These infants being suckled are like those who enter the kingdom."*
> *They said to him, "Shall we then, as children, enter the kingdom?"*
> *Jesus said to them, "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female; and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter the kingdom."*

I was immediately struck by how many of the anomalies Jesus uses here resemble the ones I turn to repeatedly to

describe my "kingdom of heaven" experiences while I'm walking. The poem above was not composed intentionally with that in mind. I was just thinking about how simple and sane seemingly complex dualities become from the perspective of a child. And, in the process, I ended up naming many of the same resolved binaries that Jesus does in this saying. I'll borrow a snippet from it to introduce the sections below, each of which focuses on one of the four "themes" I mention above as of most interest to me.

I said in "Teaching Secrets" that I wasn't certain Jesus' explanation of the sower's parable actually revealed its ultimate mystery, implying that there may be another layer (or more) of secrets to uncover. The general drift of the lost gospels is toward that end, sayings and parables that are even more enigmatic than the ones that made it into the official New Testament, including many instances where Jesus takes one or another apostle aside to share some deeper secret privately. It's as if a parable's most obvious meaning, the one he gives the apostles, for example, when they question him about it, is for popular consumption, useful and valuable, but hardly the whole of the secret hidden therein. The lost gospels delve deeper into this more mysterious aspect of his messages.

3.

"These infants being suckled are like those who enter the kingdom."

I'll start my commentary where the aphorism starts, with the figure of the child, which is as I said ubiquitous in this gospel, as in this case:

(4) *Jesus said, "The man old in days will not hesitate to ask a small child seven days old about the place of life, and he will live. For many who are first will become last, and they will become one and the same."*

This one concerns the need to return to the ultimate state of innocence, childlikeness, where language is no longer a factor in perception and learning, an image akin to the one Pelagius uses over and over, the child's face, to represent the radiant state of sinlessness we are born into. Here "a small child seven days old" becomes a font of wisdom for "[t]he man old in days," the stage of life I'm at now, when one begins to realize something of consequence about both wisdom and innocence: that it is a matter of what kind of eyes one looks at the world through that determines what one sees, an alternate sensory version of the "ears to hear" trope. A child so new to the world clearly "knows" nothing about it and has no way to share its vision. Yet its eyes see and gather everything equitably, which is what the old man here aspires to do as well. It is at these two extremes—very old and very young—that, Jesus says, first and last (in this case, newborn and elderly) become simultaneous.

This parable is quite a bit different from the "last shall be first" parables reported by the Synoptic Gospels, where the last and first always remain separate categories and the moral of the story is clear. For example, the table guests at the wedding feast in Luke 14:7-11, where seats get exchanged, the moral about humility: "those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Or in Mark 10:29-31, where leaving home and family to follow Jesus will be rewarded a hundredfold, the moral about faith: "But many who are first will be last, the last first." Or in Matthew 20:1-13,

where the vineyard owner extends the same pay to those who worked the last hours as to those who worked all day, generating some grumbling among the latter, the moral about satisfaction with receiving what was promised, the "kingdom of heaven," which is the same for all, no matter the time you spent earning it: "So the last will be first and the first will be last."

What is different in Thomas is the complete collapse of the binary: the old man and the young child become "one and the same" in relation to a state of inner innocence. I've written repeatedly about the Western habit of mind that organizes pretty much everything in terms of polar binaries, suggesting that it is not a natural tendency but a cultural construction. This parable makes that abundantly clear: a seven-day old child has not had time to be indoctrinated into that matrix, which is induced via language. And the old man is able to escape from it simply by having been moved to the fringes of society where it is easier to value and simulate the wisdom of this child. In the Synoptic Gospels the first and last may change positions or roles but they are always twos. Here the two become one quite simply and naturally, with no moral to the story other than that.

Here are other examples of the figure of the child working toward Jesus' ends:

> (37) *His disciples said, "When will you become revealed to us and when shall we see you?"*
>
> *Jesus said, "When you disrobe without being ashamed and take up your garments and place them under your feet like little children and tread on them, then will you see the son of the living one, and you will not be afraid."*

Here the disciples, apparently baffled by Jesus' confounding nature, ask him to reveal himself. Jesus answers, basically, that such a revelation is up to them, not him. And it's as simple as entering a state of childlike innocence, naked and without shame. He refers to himself enigmatically, as "the son of the living one," which is likely to confuse them even more, and promises them a lack of fear when they get where he's pointing them. One of the ongoing motifs of all the gospels is Jesus' relative frustration with his disciples' inability to make the leaps he has tried to teach them to make. There are a few such instances in the Synoptic Gospels, which I've already noted. Here it feels more like an ongoing tension built into the DNA of these relationships.

Here's another example, in which Jesus promises an extraordinary reward to any one of them who "comes to be as a child:" to become even greater than John the Baptist, the epitome, from Jesus' point of view, "among those born of women:"

> (46) *Jesus said, "Among those born of women, from Adam until John the Baptist, there is no one so superior to John the Baptist that his eyes should not be lowered (before him). Yet I have said, whichever one of you comes to be a child will be acquainted with the kingdom and will become superior to John."*

It is unresolvable, to me, whether Jesus considers himself in another category altogether, therefore more exceptional than John, but I doubt it. He is often himself childlike in these interactions, unlike the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels who seems much less lighthearted. Some of the lost gospels actually portray Jesus as quite humorous, though

that aspect to his personality is not foregrounded in this one.

And here's one about "the place where light came into being on its own accord," before even time started. Once this point of origin is recognized, individual diurnal identity will become transfigured and childlikeness becomes natural and inevitable.

> (50) *Jesus said, "If they say to you, 'Where did you come from?', say to them, 'We came from the light, the place where the light came into being on its own accord and established itself and became manifest through their image.' If they say to you, 'Is it you?', say, 'We are its children, we are the elect of the living father.' If they ask you, 'What is the sign of your father in you?', say to them, 'It is movement and repose.'"*

These are dazzling and idyllic images of the children of the light, without shame or fear, the epitome of goodness, movement and repose balanced rhythmically, breathing transcendently. We come into the world as innocents and can return to that state whenever we choose, actually must, Jesus says, to have any hope of entering the kingdom of God. How to do that is another matter altogether, one that seems to me would be more difficult, ironically, for the disciples in the flush of relative youth, full of ambition with its attendant flamboyances and fears, than it is for the old man above who is past all of that.

These child/light motifs may be one of the reasons this gospel was deemed disposably heretical, prefiguring as they do Pelagius' vision. I've indicated along the way how the church, from its earliest moments under Paul's stewardship, seemed to prefer an orthodoxy that

privileged darkness, death, and sin over light, life and innocence. Likewise, it preferred autocracy over democracy, hierarchy over community, and patriarchy over equity in its institutional structure. It took several more centuries for this agenda to be fully implemented as the foundational identity of Christianity, a process that required obsessive attention to the seemingly endless stream of heresies that kept descending on the church, including Gnosticism. This innocent "children of the light" stuff, open to all at any moment simply by waking up, and the implication that there were hidden in Jesus's teachings secrets too deep to share universally and authoritatively from the pulpit were clear threats to that agenda.

4.

"when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below . . ."

I've tried repeatedly over the years to describe in my own words what it feels like when I enter one of my ecstatic states while walking in the woods. One of the features all those descriptions have in common is the blurring of the lines between what I normally experience as my "inside," my personal identity, and the "outside," the forest around me, as if the customary boundaries between those two realms of being are fully permeable, one becoming the other and vice-versa. I describe it this way in "The Time Has Come":

> *As soon as I entered the forest itself, all of that amplified considerably. Every walk in this place is emotionally*

meaningful to me in some way: soothing, restorative, illuminating, relaxing, thought-provoking, etc. Every now and then, though, one of them is literally ecstatic, in the etymological sense of that word: I am released from "myself" and enter into a deep sense of communion with everything around me. There are no boundaries between and among us any longer. It is a wonderfully liberating feeling. The phrase that kept repeating in my head today was "I love you," and I couldn't tell whether it was coming from the inside-out toward the forest or outside-in toward me. They were in fact exactly the same thing.

This is what I call my "kingdom of heaven." It is also the state of mind I try my best to enter when I want to fathom a worthy text "quasi-poetically," a mutual interanimation with an other/author, that ambiguous "I love you" suspended between us.

Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" is a good example of such a text. The poem opens with this promise:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

This atom for atom merger resembles what I'm talking about, not the loss of identity but finding it, via the other with whom I am in communion. Whitman doesn't preach here (though he does elsewhere), he leads dialogically, so that the "you" of the poem in his equation, which is me as I read, can merge with his "I," whereby I become more myself (and I would argue "he" becomes more himself) a seeming contradiction only if you begin with strictly binary identity categories. Here is his promise to me:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

In other words, by becoming more him, my "you" becomes more me.

Like Whitman, Jesus teaches dialogically. As Christopher David Richardson notes:

> *Dialogic pedagogy acknowledges the teacher's higher status but believes this distinction is temporary and should disappear as the student progresses. To achieve freedom and efficacy, the disciples must appropriate the truth of [Jesus'] teachings for themselves. [Jesus] warns them not to rely on external authority and encourages them to look within themselves because the child of true Humanity exists within them. They can achieve a level of understanding that frees them from domination by discovering the truth for themselves.* (109)

Jesus uses any number of figures to promote this pedagogy. While there is disagreement about Jesus' literacy skills, he was most likely unable to read or write (as were his apostles), so both his learning and his teaching would have been transacted in an oral form, thus his

constant repetition of the "ears to hear" trope. This aphorism adds a striking gustatory dimension to the process:

> (108) *Jesus said, "He who will drink from my mouth will become like me. I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him."*

One might be tempted to read this as a precursor to the eucharistic consumption of Jesus's flesh and blood via the wine and wafer favored in the Catholic tradition. But that ritual, like so much else that was both extravagant and misguided, was an invention of Paul's, reiterated in the Synoptic Gospels, most famously in Matthew 26:26 and Luke 22:19-20. What Jesus proposes here, I believe, is a much more practical kind of merger via deep and careful listening, by means of which his wisdom is instilled, becoming embodied, transformatively. In other words, our "hearing ears" are the means by which we "drink" this wisdom. The transmogrification of identity Jesus promises—the two becoming one—is made possible via this visceral interaction, an actual consumption of what his mouth speaks, his revealed secrets the common ground for the merger, akin to a marriage, sealed with a mouth-to-mouth kiss, symbolizing the shared path that supplants individual agendas.

I love this new way of thinking about how wisdom might be acquired through reading or listening, not just an ultra-high-fidelity form of hearing, one that lends itself entirely to the other while also remaining fully itself, but actually drinking it down, allowing it to become, literally, part of one's own body, such that one behaves not according to superimposed rules but by natural, instinctive actions: the "good works" alternative that Pelagius and Thomas's

Jesus clearly favor over faith. This outcome, interactive embodiment, is in fact one of the defining elements of what I am calling "quasi-poetic" reading.

Jesus uses eating/drinking imagery throughout this gospel to suggest how one thing becomes another via consumption. Here's one I like about a lion:

> (7) *Jesus said, "Blessed is the lion which becomes man when consumed by man; and cursed is the man whom the lion consumes, and the lion becomes man."*

The odd thing about these alternatives is that in both cases the one consuming "becomes man," in one case remaining oneself, in the other losing oneself. Here Jesus seems to suggest again that when it comes to acquiring spiritual wisdom, the balance of power must reside on my side of the equation, making what I seek an integral part of my best self, and not on the lion's side, deferring completely to its authority until I become my worst self. The former is freedom and self-inspirited authority, the latter is blind obeisance, institutionally sanctioned domination.

Here's another less gruesome version of the inside/outside conundrum:

> (3) *Jesus said, "If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know*

yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty."

This one is vividly clear about how the power dynamic is supposed to work: Come to know yourself first and "then you will become known," i.e., will enter the kingdom of God right here, right now. What I love about this one is the full elision of the inside/outside trope that regulates the way we are conditioned, culturally and linguistically, to think instinctively about our "presence" here, instilling a chronic poverty of experience that we simply take for granted as inevitably human.

Here's another inside-outside aphorism:

(89) *Jesus said, "Why do you wash the outside of the cup? Do you not realize that he who made the inside is the same one who made the outside?"*

A cup is a perfect vessel to suggest the anomaly at play here, its thin veneer both containing what it holds and releasing it in order for us to "drink" it, turning outside into inside and inside into outside in the process.

The same conundrum lies more quietly at the heart of this one, too:

(40) *Jesus said, "A grapevine has been planted outside of the father, but being unsound, it will be pulled up by its roots and destroyed."*

Implied here, to my way of reading, is the possibility of a grapevine being planted inside the father, therefore thriving and producing good, true wine, the drinking

metaphor again. This reminds me of Socrates famous paean to dialogical discourse at the end of the *Phaedrus*:

> *Phaedrus: What sort of discourse [of unquestioned legitimacy] have you in mind now, and what is its origin?*
>
> *Socrates: The sort that goes together with knowledge, and is written on the soul of the learner, that can defend itself and knows to whom it should speak and to whom it should say nothing.*
>
> . . .
>
> *Socrates: But far more excellent [for important topics] is the serious treatment of them, which employs the art of dialectic . . . [sowing] words which instead of remaining barren contain a seed whence new words grow up in new characters, whereby the seed is vouchsafed immortality, and its possessor the fullest measure of blessedness that man can attain unto.* (521-22)

Here, too, almost half a millennium before Jesus' moment, the force of orality wins the day, this time from someone ultra-literate who also never wrote down one word of his own wisdom, which survives primarily because Plato did, much as Jesus' wisdom does via Thomas who records what he said. I'm not so sure Jesus and Socrates would have been companionable conversationalists, but I think they'd agree about this. And Plato and Thomas might well have many interesting conversations about how and why they did their respective writing, in both cases simulating textually the very dialogical form that both Socrates and Jesus prefer as their teaching method.

5.

> *"and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female . . ."*

How the Christian culture became, almost universally, so stringently patriarchal, even misogynist (just this past week, for example, the Southern Baptist Convention in America decided to "disfellowship" several of its churches for having female pastors) is understandable, if unforgivable, given the Roman culture into which it was gradually assimilated. This tendency is not, though, founded on the words or habits of Jesus, who clearly liked women, attracted them as disciples, and treated them as equals to the men in his entourage, even when they didn't. Mary Magdalene is the best example of this. I won't go into the complex history of this remarkable woman in relation both to her discipleship and to her gradual transformation over time from Jesus' highly favored follower and friend, perhaps even partner, to a one-dimensional whore. Paul initiated this process, as I said, and it got gradually amplified via the Romanization of Christianity, Augustine and Jerome two of the more aggressive proponents of the patriarchal culture that fostered misogyny as one of its side-effects. Here is a good example to illustrate the gender-tension among Jesus' disciples:

> (21) *Mary said to Jesus, "Whom are your disciples like?" He said, "They are like children who have settled in a field which is not theirs. When the owners of the field come, they will say, 'Let us have back our field.' They (will) undress in their presence in order to let them have back their field and to give it back to them. Therefore I say, if the owner of a house knows that the thief is coming, he will begin his vigil before*

he comes and will not let him dig through into his house of his domain to carry away his goods. You, then, be on your guard against the world. Arm yourselves with great strength lest the robbers find a way to come to you, for the difficulty which you expect will (surely) materialize. Let there be among you a man of understanding. When the grain ripened, he came quickly with his sickle in his hand and reaped it. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear."

Mary is clearly a prominent enough disciple to ask Jesus a direct question (a feminine role that Paul specifically precludes in Corinthians 1). And Jesus' answer, delivered in the presence of his male apostles, is a stunning rebuke of their apparent gender privilege. Here is one of the few instances in Jesus' teachings where childlikeness is a bad thing. These men, he implies, will give up the field meekly and completely when the owners demand it back. Jesus' admonition to them is to prepare to defend the "house," one's inner kingdom of God, "against the world," which they certainly have to learn how to do in the aftermath of his execution. The "man of understanding" will reap the grain expeditiously, before it withers or can be stolen. All of this is punctuated by the "ears to hear" trope that Jesus often repeats when he's trying to get his disciples to wake up. The reference to "man" seems to me to suggest that Mary may be the only one among those gathered exempt from his critique.

Jesus' respect for Mary here, even his privileging her among his disciples, leads to some tension, particularly with Peter, the most hot-headed among them. Here is the final entry in Thomas' gospel:

(114) *Simon Peter said to them, "Mary should leave us, because women aren't worthy of life." Jesus said, "Look,*

am I to make her a man? So that she may become a living spirt too, she's equal to you men, because every woman who makes herself manly will enter the kingdom of heaven."
(Noah edition)

Jesus is having none of Simon Peter's misogynistic bluster, rebuffing it immediately and forcefully, in what may look initially like a self-contradictory manner, by turning Mary into a man. It seems absolutely clear to me, though, that Jesus is not interested in indoctrinating Mary or his female disciples into an ideology of patriarchy, one that will permanently subordinate them to male domination. He is talking here, I believe, about a form of androgyny, one he recommends to the men among them as well, the merger of male and female identity features, such that neither dominates, both resonate companionably, leading to a transcendence of the oppressive gender binary that makes it impossible to "enter the kingdom of heaven," which is where the poem that heads this section starts its "thinking" about childlikeness.

6.

"When you make the two one . . ."

The most radical theme of this gospel, for me at least, is Jesus' collapse of the stereotypical binary habits of the Western mind, which I've illustrated many times already. Very little of this makes it into the Biblical canon down the line, for the same reasons, I believe, that Augustine worked so strenuously to sideline Pelagius: Patriarchy (as well as the other three horsemen of the apocalypse that bell hooks names: imperialism, white supremacy, and capitalism) simply cannot survive outside of binaries. Pelagius is as close as I've been able to find so far to a

prominent contestant in the argument who believes that two can become one. And you know now what fate he met for that heresy.

Here are a few additional passages where Jesus further explores this two-into-one enigma:

> (11) *Jesus said, "This heaven will pass away, and the one above it will pass away. The dead are not alive, and the living will not die. In the days when you consumed what is dead, you made it what is alive. When you come to dwell in the light, what will you do? On the day when you were one you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?"*

> (48) *Jesus said, "If two make peace with each other in this one house, they will say to the mountain, 'Move Away,' and it will move away."*

In the first example, oneness becoming twoness creates confusion—for example the illusion that life and death exist in a strict binary relationship—making it impossible to "dwell in the light," where all that tension is resolved. In the latter example Jesus uses reconciliation between the two (rather than faith as in Matthew 7:20) as the means for moving mountains with a simple command, a dramatic shift in the conception of where spiritual power is founded.

Here is another variation on this mountain-moving mojo, in this case Jesus promising his disciples they will become "sons of man" if they reconcile themselves in this way:

(106) *Jesus said, "When you make the two one, you will become the sons of man, and when you say, 'Mountain, move away,' it will move away."*

This one is darker and even more dramatic:

(61) *Jesus said, "Two will rest on a bed: the one will die, and the other will live." Salome said, "Who are you, man, that you ... have come up on my couch and eaten from my table?"*
Jesus said to her, "I am he who exists from the undivided. I was given some of the things of my father."
<...> "I am your disciple."
<...> "Therefore I say, if he is destroyed, he will be filled with light, but if he is divided, he will be filled with darkness."

What I see here (beside the obvious fact that Salome is another woman conversing as an equal with Jesus) are the various ways in which twos might become one in everyday life, via sexual intercourse and eating, for example. Jesus claims his very existence is "from the undivided." I take his "if he is destroyed" to mean becoming one, which fills one with light; division fills one with darkness, a pretty stark warning to attach to simple binary structures, which spawn all the dark things bell hooks names in her calling card for patriarchy.

7.

"and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter the kingdom."

This one, coming at the conclusion of the passage I started with, seems especially elusive to me. I personally take Jesus to mean (based on what I've arrived at via the other themes so far) that one needs to rebuild oneself from the ground up, from the inside out and the outside in, to create an authentic likeness in place of the generic "likeness" that culture and society indoctrinate us into. This requires every step I've detailed thus far: becoming childlike, reconciling the inside with the outside, transcending gender, and resolving binaries into singularities, twos into ones. "[T]hen will you enter the kingdom," which is the point of it all, for me at least, where I want to be as often and for as long as humanly possible.

I'll close with one more parable that may seem unrelated to all of this. I choose it because its version here is so different from the one that Matthew (17:20-21), Luke (17:6), and Mark (11:30-32) report in their gospels, where the mustard seed becomes a symbol for the exponential growth potential that the tiniest seed of faith plants in us, one that can ultimately move mountains.

> (20) *The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like."*
> *He said to them, "It is like a mustard seed. It is the smallest of all seeds. But when it falls on tilled soil, it produces a great plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky."*

Here the mustard seed becomes simply "a shelter for birds of the sky," innocent and gorgeous, not a mountain-mover but a place to come home to. Most mustard plants are not sturdy enough to shelter birds. But this one, planted within, can become such a one, a matrix for self-

recreation, those birds the lovely inner flying things that rise and settle in us once we become childlike and resolve the various identity binaries Jesus assails in this gospel. That's as good a place as any for me to close, as I decide now exactly where I want to walk today, every one of my possible choices replete with great plants offering shelter for birds of the sky. And for me.

8.

epilogue

(49) *Jesus said, "Blessed are the solitary . . . , for you will find the kingdom. For you are from it, and to it you will return."*

The Curious Cosmos: Taoism and Quantum Mechanics

"Poetry is the cosmos awakened to itself."

David Hinton

Prefatory Note

I said the title of the Pelagius-Augustine essay was "ominous" and that its epigraph was "hauntingly succinct." The combination above makes that look like chump change; here it's more like "grandiose" and "what the hell is does poetry have to do with the cosmos waking up?" I wrote this essay well over a year ago, before this book about waking up entered my mind. It's been waiting in the wings for a companionable home. This is now it. In an email to a friend shortly after I wrote it I said it was somewhere between esoteric and crackpot, depending on your point of view. So I am aware of how "out there" it might seem; and that it has a different vibe than the essays preceding it here. Still, I want to insist that not only is this essay integral to the collection, it is an inevitable extension of the concept of waking up I've been exploring along the way. Yes, to get here, you have to concede the veracity of Hermes,' Buhner's and Pelagius' positions (and Jesus' I would argue, though he is less express about it) that all of "nature," from the tiniest subatomic particle up to the universe as a whole, is in fact god- or soul-infused; and that we humans are born "with" that nature, not "against" it.

I've been talking about waking up thus far primarily in relation to individualized experiences, perceptual and/or spiritual. But at least sometimes when I enter that state of mind, I realize that consciousness, the "life" of my mind, is not proprietary, a personal,

localized phenomenon; it is constituent with the cosmos itself, the "Life of Mind" on a grand scale. And that like the Word in John's gospel it must have been built into the system that way right from the start. Why would the universe include that dimension in its very "nature?" The only answer that makes sense to me is that the cosmos is as curious to know itself as I am to know myself. And it has evolved very sophisticated instruments to facilitate that process. We are one of them.

It's certainly possible that a curious cosmos could get to know an awful lot about itself without my active participation, or any "outside" help at all. But think about it: How do we get to know ourselves? There are to be sure certain kinds of knowledge that we acquire via individual, solitary enterprise, perceiving, feeling, thinking, i.e., just being alive, all good. But there is another deeper kind of knowledge that requires dialogue with an "other": We talk, listen, read, write, study, incorporating thereby the perceiving, feeling and thinking of all those others into our our own "experience," a process of supplementation that has mystified and inspired me ever since I discovered poetry in my early teens, all of which I write about in some detail in Rereading Poets: The Life of the Author.

The mechanism for all this mojo-making is the reflexivity inbuilt to dialogue itself, the back and forth and back again, whereby both parties acquire something "new" from one another, something unattainable via solitary enterprise. That is, to me, the defining feature of a genuinely dialogic experience: The other provides a mirror in which I can see myself newly, and I repay that favor. In effect, there are four of us "present" in such transactions: me and a mirrored version of me, the other and a mirrored version of them. I argue, again in Rereading Poets, that this equation applies even when I read the words of long-dead authors, who somehow come to "life" in the moment of our interaction. Everything in the natural world we live in, can, I honestly believe, converse with us similarly. When we engage in those "conversations," by looking and listening

attentively, we become eyes and ears by which the cosmos can witness itself. It takes some practice to serve that purpose well. I can do it only briefly and from time to time by waking up in the specific way I describe in this essay. And when I wake up that way, so does the cosmos.

So where do Taoism and quantum mechanics come into this? Well, most simply, they are two analogous modes of engagement with the cosmos that not only invite but require the kind of dialogic reflexivity I've just described. As to my qualifications to write about these two specialized areas of human enterprise? In relation to quantum mechanics: I was a physics major for most of my college career before, at the very last minute, deciding to devote my intellectual life to poetry and poetics. In my mind, the distance between mathematics and poetry as discourses for revealing the secrets of the cosmos is almost immeasurably slight. It is only Western cultural biases that insert unbridgeable divides between the two. The ancients, many of them, knew otherwise. Why I made my choice is, as Socrates says, "a long story to tell." But I have retained an active interest in physics throughout my life, especially as it has gotten more and more exotic over the last 30 years or so. If I were coming into my conundrum right now instead of back in the 1960s, I might well make the opposite choice. Am I an expert on quantum mechanics? No, of course not. Am I a quack? Judge for yourself as you read this piece. And in relation to Taoism: I am admittedly a latecomer to this enterprise, but I have over the last several years devoted a significant amount of time to reading, thinking about, and attempting to practice that set of disciplines. Am I an expert? No, of course not. A quack? Read and judge for yourself. Then you can decide whether what I proffer here is esoteric or crackpot.

As to the status of poetry in all of this? I have already indicated, in "Teaching Secrets," that the method of reading I'm proposing for acquiring hidden secrets "is quasi-poetic rather than narrative or logical," "quasi" because the production of actual poems is not

essential to the process. As I say over and over in my writing, poetry is fundamentally a way of seeing that only sometimes consummates with saying. Often, as I did in "Teaching Secrets," I turn to Percy Shelley, who says the same thing much more eloquently and extensively. The latter sections of this essay explain how this sort of specialized poetic experience works, for me at least, as a portal to mutuality with the cosmos. When I wake up this way, poetically, the cosmos also wakes up and sees itself, exactly as David Hinton says in my epigraph. That's what poetry has to do with it.

1.

Many contemporary scientists and philosophers are dismissive of attempts to link Eastern philosophies with quantum mechanics (e.g., The Tao of Physics), suggesting that such conjunctions are questionable at best, if not entirely bogus. I understand and to a certain extent share their reservations, especially in relation to the New-Agey vagueness that characterizes many of these attempts, a catchy slogan replacing careful thinking, sustained reading, and an ongoing openness to innovations in both areas. But I think three things about those reservations: They often focus narrowly on express scientific precision rather than on overall figurative patterns, which are remarkably parallel; they are not always based on the latest data from either of these always-in-motion disciplines; and they tend to valorize the technical currencies of the moment, which are fleeting, and devalue the "wisdom of the ages," which has proven to be quite durable.

Of course, the primary Taoist/Ch'an poets (the tradition I focus on) were not professional physicists, nor

are contemporary physicists accomplished gurus. Yet both seek to operate in many of the same provinces of knowledge; and there are enough commonalities in the figurative arrays they use to describe the most mysterious aspects of our universe to at least consider whether there are in-common insights at their core. For example, Lao Tzu uses the term "dark enigma" to name Way before it is named, the invisible, mysteriously generative tissue that mediates the turbulent translation of absence into presence and vice-versa. Comparably, physicists are currently trying to fathom the nature and role of what they call "dark energy," which constitutes about two-thirds of the current universe; and several of the explanations, whether expressed in terms of Einstein's General Theory or quantum mechanics, seem to indicate that it represents not just a blank propulsive force amplifying the rate of the universe's expansion but also a potentially generative force for the "creation" of space and, possibly, even virtual matter.

A month or two ago I was watching a documentary on dark energy and I began to imagine it as a sort of invisible, immaterial fabric that serves as both the reservoir and foundation for the material universe. The Taoist concept of Way as the invisible generative tissue that mediates the relationship between Absence and Presence, a feminine force that allows the empirical universe to burgeon forth in all of its many manifestations, is an analogous way to think about that relationship between what appears to be "real" and where it comes from. Dark energy may simply be the ground out of which the material reality that we think of as the universe emerges and then disappears. And it may provide the flexible matrix that explains (1) the outlandish sort of "inflation" that occurred just after the

Big Bang and (2) how intergalactic spaces stretch to account for the accelerating expansion of the universe, without enormous detectable sources of "normal" gravity. Both of these things are demonstrably true. They are just hard to account for in the framework of Newtonian or, in certain respects, even Einsteinian mechanics.

Here is a brief information sheet from NASA that offers a place to start thinking about some of the "creative" possibilities of dark energy on firmer scientific ground: https://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/what-is-dark-energy. As this piece makes clear, even what we have historically imagined as the "empty" vacuum of space is boiling up with oppositional particles that appear and disappear instantaneously. This echoes, to me, the Taoist concept of *tzu jan*, most commonly translated as "spontaneity" or even more vaguely "nature," but which is literally (via David Hinton's translations) "self-ablaze" or "occurrence appearing of itself." One can see in these latter versions the way in which "nature" itself is construed as something that arises spontaneously out of nothing, like all of those particles in the void, which are (according to some theorists) reminiscent of the manner in which the universe we perceive and know is merely the leftovers from the unimaginably large conflagration that was the Big Bang, all those infinite numbers of matter-antimatter pairs self-annihilating, leaving behind a miniscule residue of particles that, over time, assembled themselves into everything we now see. It may seem a stretch to suggest that consciousness operates similarly, our own special mode of "self-ablazeness," but that is certainly in keeping with Taoist and quantum

mechanics conceptions of "nature," which not only include but require consciousness as one of its aspects.

It is even possible to imagine that everything we see is being reignited like this at each instant, an ongoing process of creation and absorption that becomes elemental to the fabric of time as we know it. I had an experience of this sort on a walk at Woodard Bay a year or so ago, one I documented this way in *Living Hidden:*

> *The understory is ferns, almost exclusively, I mean millions of them, stretching as far as eye can see into the depths of the forest. Caught today momentarily in their overwhelming midst, I had the strongest sense of their seemingly eternal presence in this place, tens of thousands of years I assume, looking exactly like this, placid, elegant, filling the stillness with a stillness of their own. On the one hand, the scene seemed timeless to me, outside of time, one mode of negative time [a concept I was exploring in this essay]. On the other, I felt I was walking into the maw of a huge vortex of time, one that was at once both drawing the future back into the present and spewing the present out of the past. It was an awesome feeling, all of this swirling time suddenly stilled with each step among these grand ferns, time negating itself in both directions to allow each moment of the "present" to feel endless.* (78-79)

Coincident with all of this is the influence of what Taoists call *wu wei*, often translated as "non-action," especially in the versions of Buddhism we have inherited via the Japanese tradition, one that gets implemented as a form of vacant "sitting." Taoists, though, imagined it not as inaction but as no unnatural action, i.e., acting spontaneously in the moment, sometimes quite

flamboyantly, as in dramatic scenes depicted by both Lao Tzu and Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu.) Hinton translates the term as "nothing's-own-doing," which much more evocatively conveys the way in which conscious behavior is another mode of "absence" burgeoning into "presence" of its own accord, without our pre-meditated interventions, or those of a Master-God.

Thus, *wu wei* and *tzu jan* are complementary processes by means of which nothing becomes something and vice-versa, again, all in keeping, figuratively, with the world that quantum mechanics imagines via its own figures. For example, one of the current mysteries in the quantum universe is "dark matter," which apparently aggregated hydrogen and helium in the early universe into a lightless cosmic "web" that became the matrix for early stars, and subsequently everything we now see, a portion of the material universe that must be five times greater than the one we see, providing "halos" of gravity-rich matter around galaxies to prevent them from swirling off into surrounding space, but remaining (so far) elusive to measurement.

Add "dark matter" to the equation with "dark energy," and you enter into a conundrum that enough resembles Lao Tzu's "dark enigma" to warrant examining the comparative structures of these analogous figurative patterns and their implications as they pertain to "nature," including the role of consciousness, the observational power of the universe that brings it to fruition. So I want to set aside my skepticism to see where I can take what more and more seem (to me) to be intimate parallels between these two ways of thinking about the nature of cosmos. Some of them arise from my current reading in both areas, some arise from

problems I'm trying to navigate as a practicing poet, yes, but much more deeply and broadly as a human being hoping to come to some foundational understanding of this beautiful and mysterious world I have been gifted this time to experience and contemplate.

2.

Both Taoist thinkers and quantum theorists seem (to me) to agree that both "spacetime" and "consciousness" are foundationally and granularly quantic (i.e., involving two sometimes apparently contrary variables interacting homogenously) in their essential operations, always this and that, there and here, then and now simultaneously, even as those distinct states might seem mutually contradictory. Non-contradictory dualistic simultaneity appears in fact to be the defining feature of systems that operate according to quantum-mechanical principles. The enigmatic particle-wave duality of subatomic probability states has been demonstrated beyond any doubt. We may not be able to fully explain how that is possible or why that is so, but it is, in fact, the case. And the *Tao Te Ching* is full of seemingly contradictory pairs of concepts ("In bent is straight./ In hollow is full," etc., etc.) yoked integrally, as if they are inseparably one.

Consciousness has a parallel dualistic nature, in that the brain is fully capable of maintaining its equilibrium in areas and with experiences that simultaneously exhibit contradictory aspects. It is, in fact (I would say), expressly designed to do so, which is what makes it so useful and powerful as a mirroring interface with "reality." Many poets have noted just such a capacity as the foundation for their creativity. Keats, for example,

called it "negative capability," an ability to reside comfortably among "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." His choice of the word "negative" is a telling one, implying that this state of mind is a receptive openness that can abide with uncertainties of the unresolvable dualistic kind I've been considering, even savor and seek to sustain them. At the extreme, it seems to me to be akin with the Taoist notion of absence, that rich, dark reservoir overflowing with emergent presence, which is more set free than "created." I'm quite sure Keats was not knowledgeable about the great Ch'an poets of the Tang dynasty. But I suspect he would have enjoyed engaging in conversation with them about this sort of open-ended interfacing with the world.

Dualisms seem to be built into the fundamental character of this particular universe, at least as humans perceive it, in that they are foundational to all the philosophical and spiritual systems I'm familiar with. There are, of course, many different ways in which dualisms can be expressed. Western philosophy, as I said in "Pelagius, Augustine and the Death of Nature," tends to orchestrate its dualistic pairs at opposite poles from one another: e.g., left/right, hot/cold, right/wrong, and, more pertinently, mind/matter, which do not share properties across the platform that separates them categorically. They are mutually exclusive binaries. You can see this structure from Socrates (the pre-Socratics were more complex) through post-structuralism, with Descartes providing the most stringent framework for Modern thinking. Newtonian physics operates in this philosophical paradigm.

There are a range of what I'd call tripartite alternatives to this bi-polarity—Hegel's dialectic and C.S. Pierce's triadic system are two good examples. But they basically end up (from my point of view) being binary. For Hegel (and Marx, et al.) a thesis counterposed with an antithesis simply generates a new thesis, ad infinitum. For Pierce (and many language theorists) a sign brings its interpretant sign into correspondence with its object, which becomes a new sign, ad infinitum. So these approaches are fundamentally binary in their base states.

Eastern philosophies, including Taoism, orchestrate dualisms, too, but generally in relational terms and on a platform that operates as a continuous spectrum. There are no simple, categorical distinctions, only mores and lesses. The clearest representation of this is the yin-yang circle, with a black dot in the white portion and a white dot in the black portion, suggesting not just that these two arenas are interconnected, but that they are co-present with and to each other across the spectrum. Earth/sky, absence/presence, even mind/matter, all operate in such a codependent relationship. This is exactly the paradigm that quantum mechanics posits, the most obvious example being the particle/wave duality of micro-level matter. These are not either/or states (until the moment of observation), they are always-both, a probabilistic mist of possibilities built into the very nature of the universe we inhabit.

At a further extreme, the phenomenon of quantum entanglement demonstrates that even a specific "thing" can be in two places at the same time, intimately co-present with itself, communicating instantaneously from, theoretically, one end of the universe to another, not

even abiding by the fixed speed limit that light (and everything else) must always obey. Some theorists argue that at the quantum level a single wave function may encompass the whole universe, only collapsing to a point at the moment of observation. On a smaller scale, in leaves, experiments indicate that photosynthetic energy seems to test out every available path to its destination instantaneously, until it settles on the most efficient way to deliver its payload to the larger organism.

3.

For both Taoism and quantum mechanics, consciousness is implicated in this overall process as a mediating agent. Lao Tzu prefers the metaphor of the mirror (which he uses repeatedly), a state of consciousness that reflects what it perceives without adding to or subtracting from it. But for him, it is an active rather than passive capacity of mind, akin to the role of "observation" in quantum physics.

One term that Western thinkers have used to name the interface between consciousness and the universe is the "imagination." I've written about this more extensively elsewhere (*The Imagination: a tour of Western poetics in a series of brief sketches*) so I won't go into detail about how the definition of that particular mental "faculty" has historically reflected momentary cultural biases in regard to relationships between inside and outside, especially as they pertain to "creativity." My favorite take on this problem is Coleridge's much-disparaged definition of the "primary Imagination" as "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of

creation in the infinite I Am." I take his point here to be quite narrow and practical: that acts of perception by their constitutive nature bring witnessed, already-extant worlds to a fruition that would not be possible without them, remotely akin to the way the "infinite I am" (whether we name it God or Way or the universe) brings worlds into being out of nothingness, or into presence out of absence.

More recently, as in a book that came out just last year, Anil Seth, a British neuroscientist, uses the term "controlled hallucination" to characterize the ongoing work of perception, a chapter he begins with this sentence: "I open my eyes and a world appears," (79) which is, to me at least, another way of saying what Coleridge says about how the primary Imagination operates. The ongoing stream of appearances our brain hallucinates is regulated, Anil says, by "predictions which cascade in a top-down direction through the brain's perceptual hierarchies" (87). The "control" element derives not from sensory signals but from ongoing informed "guesses" the brain makes, based on experience, striving to minimize "errors," all in the service of survival. Rather than taking in a world "direct to our conscious minds through our sensory organs," our habituated sense of how perception works, "what we actually perceive is a top-down, inside-out neuronal fantasy that is reined in by reality, not a transparent window onto whatever that reality is" (88). In other words, reality is more downloaded than uploaded. Seth concludes: "If perception is controlled hallucination, then—equally—hallucination can be thought of as uncontrolled perception. . . . [T]o ask where to draw the line is like asking where the boundary is between night and day" (89).

Coleridge relied on laudanum (an opium solution), a commonly used anodyne at the time, to relieve minor pains, becoming more and more addicted, gradually ceding degrees of "control" over his perception-correction mechanism. He claims his famous poem "Kubla Kahn" came to him essentially in finished form in one of his laudanum-induced "dreams," which was truncated by the untimely intrusion of the infamous "man from Porlock." Later in life, if the testimony of others is to be believed, Coleridge became more and unhinged, at least socially if not intellectually. Apparently, many other poets of that era used laudanum as well—Byron, Shelley and Keats among the major Romantics, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning later in the century. All of which is to say that there is a boundaryless spectrum to the "creative" work of perception, the appearance of worlds, some culminating in actual poetic experiences and compositions, all of which, even the most "normalized," have, according to both Coleridge and Anil, some hallucinatory aspect to them.

Here's a story I tell in *Harvest* that illustrates my emerging awareness, in college, of the in-built hallucinogenic capacity of my own brain, and the boundary-related issues that "control" where on the spectrum it is most likely to reside:

> *The second experience I remembered was a conversation I had as a college freshman with another student, a friend, who offered me some LSD. It was 1967, so drugs were everywhere. I had grown up in a small town, insulated until right around that time from the emergent drug culture, hallucinogenics especially. I*

> *asked him what effects it produced. He said something like this: "Everything will appear hyper-real, even unreal to some extent, things will morph into extreme versions of themselves, even other things, like a Dali painting maybe. Time will both slow down and speed up, like eternity in an instant, if you're lucky. You may find yourself communing with spiritual forces or entities. You may reach deep religious insights or just be frightened out of your wits and totally creeped out." I stopped him there, saying, that's what the inside of my head is like most of the time already. I think if I took something to amplify that I would go away and never come back (as some people I knew didn't, later on, when I became more aware of the potentially deleterious effects of the abuse of hallucinogenics.) I told him I'd pass. I'm so happy I did. Further, I never thereafter took any hallucinogenic drugs, for the same reason, stuck to entry-level stuff, and not even any excess of that. I wanted to be here not somewhere I'd never find a way back from.* (122)

So, while I agree with those scientists and philosophers who argue that the universe existed in a material way (even if in a form that is fundamentally different from the one we ultimately perceive) prior to the evolution of consciousness, and that it continues to exist in some form in the absence of consciousness; it is not out of the realm of probability (at least to me) to say that it only reveals itself to itself (comes most fully into being, i.e.) via the various modes of consciousness it has evolved toward that end, and one way of naming that hallucinatory capacity is the imagination.

What the brain is or does in such engagements remains open to question, but emerging evidence suggests that

the brain itself has a quantic foundation, with the real work of its complex interfacing functions taking place via quantum-like microtubules in the interstices between neurons. In practical terms, this suggests that the brain is only superficially a computational device comprising a matrix of on-off switches, as per a traditional computer, a cultural commonplace for at least the last 50-60 years.

There has been an ongoing assumption that the brain operates in a way directly analogous to whatever is the current state of computing technology, a perverse sort of "reverse engineering," in this case imagining that an organic system is operationally analogous with a technical device, simply because we have created such devices to perform some of the more tedious tasks that we have historically relied on brains to do. It would be as if 19th century theorists assumed the brain was a steam engine simply because that was the apex of technology at the moment! In the 1970s, for example, with the emergence of AI and early computational programs like Deep Blue, which depended on a polar-binary computational system (1 is always and only 1 but never 0 and vice-versa: a rigidly Cartesian duality) organized along a single linear internal circuit, just such a misguided analogy took hold.

The euphoria of that moment, which I experienced firsthand, predicted all kinds of near-term (5-10 years) world-altering applications of computer technology to everyday life, most of which took much longer, 30-50 years (or have not yet happened), and required multiple exponential advances in processing power, as well as multiple parallel circuits calculating cooperatively to achieve. At each generational turn along that way, the conception of the way the brain operated got "updated"

to reflect the available technology, repeating and extending the original analogical fallacy.

The emergence of the quantum computer has now revolutionized what it is (or will soon be) possible to do with a computer by freeing the 1s and 0s from their isolated determinacy. Now, a bit can be both 1 and 0 simultaneously, or anywhere on the spectrum between the two. This is exactly (to my way of thinking) the sort of dualism that Taoism depends on (thus the many irresolvable koans and poetic constructions, the elusive mystery of which is designed to provoke unexpected, sudden, synthetic, non-verbal, illumination) and, more practically, how human consciousness operates, if/when one is at all self-reflective about experience. It is, in fact, what brains are best at, not as computational devices operating with Cartesian binaries.

Consciousness (many Taoists argue and some recent quantum theorists, especially those thinking about the directionality of time, seem to agree) is in its most practical aspect a faculty that this particular universe has evolved (not intentionally necessarily, but inevitably, given its initial conditions) to experience itself, to become self-cognizant in a multi-sensory, embodied way. From this point of view, the universe can only come fully into being via that sort of self-reflexive awareness. The mysteriously definitive aspects of "observation" in both philosophy (e.g., Berkeley's famous question about the tree falling in the forest) and the physical sciences (where the design of an experiment appears to determine which of its two possible conditions a subatomic entity will express) implicate consciousness as an indigenous facet of the process, even if its specific function remains elusive to explanation.

Thus, matter and mind seem to be matched to each other somehow.

One of the things I like about the Taoist tradition is the assumption that "enlightenment" is not considered a rare transcendency achieved only by an elite few via extended, arduous labor. It is everyday perception, consciousness in effect. The universe can, then, become awakened to itself via any individual life form, from the most complex to the most rudimentary, all of which establish sensory connections to their immediate surroundings, if only to nourish themselves, replicate, and stay alive. Human mind may not, in fact, be the preeminent vehicle for this awakening, simply one among many. Once, though, one considers one's presence in the world in this light, a certain kind of self-reflexive awareness begins to emerge, the sense that one's experiences of/in the cosmos are not exclusively or entirely "personal;" that one can, in fact, serve as a portal for this broader kind of awakening on behalf of the cosmos, even if that portal is very tiny, local, and momentary in its nature. When such a self-consciousness (a consciousness of this consciousness) begins to emerge, poetry becomes not only possible but, in some respect, inevitable. It is, in effect, the poetic sensibility in motion, even if/when it never culminates in the production, distribution, or reception of things we might recognize as actual poems. That part of the process is not necessarily irrelevant, but it is not essential. A poet is simply one who chooses to use perception, and sometimes language, in some way to report, even if only to themselves, what their individual consciousness accomplishes on behalf of the cosmos' awakening.

4.

So what might all of this mean in actual practice? Let me begin, for argument's sake, with what might seem like an unwarranted, even preposterous, assumption: that the universe has an intrinsic "curiosity" about its own nature. There is, of course, no evidence to support this directly, and likely never will be. But it seems to be the case that our particular universe is ordered according to a set of "laws" (which we now know a great deal about) that make it likely if not inevitable that after a certain amount of time and under a limited number of conditions "life" will emerge, conscious life. Why? Who knows? But one possible explanation is that it is by this means that the cosmos can finally become awakened to its own nature, each one of these conscious entities providing a reflecting pool or a mirror that the curious cosmos can hack into to see itself. Even as rigorous and cantankerous a thinker as C.S. Pierce proposed that the evolution of the universe may be self-animated in some way, in his case by a very specific kind of "love," which is analogous in some structural ways to what I'm calling curiosity (if, of course, you strip off the theological component of his argument, an alteration I'm quite sure Pierce, ever the strict logician, would disapprove of!) What I think Pierce's hypothesis shares with mine is an in-built tendency toward cosmic consciousness.

The awakening that this curiosity makes possible can have many types and degrees. Imagine for example the differences between the portals opened by, say, the eyes of a frog sitting on a lily pad in a pond and a collective of astronomers collaborating to map the farthest reaches of the universe through the various kinds of remote

"eyes" our technological culture now makes available. Or imagine what sort of portal is opened by trees in a forest, whose extraordinary sensory instruments, individually and collectively, we are only now beginning to understand in some fragmentary and rudimentary ways.

More specifically, in keeping with the purpose of this essay, we might ask what is the role of poetry, and individual poets, in this regard? Certainly, not all poets and/or poems intend to establish mutually beneficial relations with the curious cosmos. Most don't or can't. I personally write many different kinds of poems with many different kinds of ambitions, some of which have specifically to do with my "self" in its narrow worldly sense. But some do in fact invite me to diminish or abandon that self-based identity-center and its many discourses to encounter the world at large in some legitimately meditative or ecstatic (literally, a standing outside-of-myself) sense. In effect, when I approach the world this way, I begin to engage in a mirroring dialogue with what's outside of me. We begin to "see" one another through the other's eyes, in the same way that mutual self-revelation is the outcome when we have a real conversation with another person, each party not just getting to see the other, but also getting to see themselves via reflections in another pool or mirror. When I engage with what is immediately present to me from the cosmos, there is a similar sort of mutual self-learning that I feel going on, one that allows me to experience my seemingly trivial vantage point as extraordinarily valuable, and that causes the local version of my self to begin to evaporate. This is, I believe, a partial and small-scale example of the genuine

transcendence that mystics and gurus experience routinely and more fully.

There are certain very practical matters pertaining to perception that become pertinent here. I use a simple set of figures (with behavioral implications) to account for what I do, how I do it, and why. One pertains to my imagined sense of the focal point of my attention. Since I am reclusive by nature, my default position for this focal point is inside my head. I've written elsewhere about various practices (vaguely resembling meditation) that I began to use as early as my teenage years to relieve the pressure of self-presence that this constant inwardness created. They all involve projecting that focal point outside myself. I mean literally feeling that my locus of attention was no longer in-here but out-there. I've done it focusing on anything from the back of a chair to the stars. They all take some effort and some time, but they all work. And once the transition takes place, which to me feels like popping through the outer liquid skin of a bubble, what's out-there takes over my consciousness and "I" become one-with some thing(s) other than me. Self becomes transparent in a way, almost irrelevant to the process. There is no hocus-pocus or magic to this. It is something anyone can do, if they choose to, in a few minutes, with, I suspect, the same results.

The second element of this perceptual transition is implicit in the first. The universe, or at least the parts of it I am in direct contact with in these interims, feels (to me) as if it is now aware of itself, having used my consciousness to achieve that state. Again, the economy of this relationship does not depend on years of study or extended meditation on my part. What I do now is

pretty much what I did as a teenager, knowing even less then about Taoist/Buddhist disciplines than I do now, which is not much. Given my temperament, achieving this release from my inside-focused self takes some intentional work. Others might find it easier, I have no idea. My point here is that it is by these means that individual consciousness can place itself in the service of the curious universe's desire to apprehend itself.

Here's a poem called "The Poet Comes Out at Night" I wrote about 50 years ago that enacts such an event:

He waits in a thicket
like moonlight seeping
down along twig-tip,
leaf-vein and branch.

Suddenly the razor
edge of his voice leans
cold and gentle against
my throat, prodding.

I follow each flick
of the blade all adazzle
with moonlight and
do not know what to say.

I empty my wallet
in his hands, empty
my pockets in his hands,
empty my hands . . .

He leaves behind
nothing but moonlight
in a thicket, all that
he wanted to say.

As this poem implies, in these encounters it sometimes (but not always: often they are entirely "silent") feels to me as if bits of language are being given to me, from the outside-in, gifts of a sort, which I can arrange into poems that provide documentation of those experiences, for me primarily (to learn something for or about myself), sometimes for other readers (I have a microscopic audience, so that seems to be secondary, though some of the things I make seem somehow to "find" the one person, and it is often only one, who needs to read it, and who reports to me about the how and why of that connection.) But, if my initial proposition is not thoroughly outlandish, they also become documentation of moments in this larger process of the cosmos' awakening. And the compositions that result actually feel to me as if they are collaborative, dialogical, not entirely or even primarily mine, belonging in some fundamental way to something outside of my "self." The "other" in this interaction could, of course, be simply a hidden part of myself, one I can only become conscious of, awakened to, via this type of interlocution. But even in that limited case, there is mutually supportive revelation at work, one that calls into question stereotypical notions about what selfhood is and is for in this cosmic context.

One of the more pleasant symptoms of such selfless states of mind is an altered experience of time. Instead of seeming to move grudgingly or frantically forward, out of an extant, fixed past into an empty future, our

customary way of imagining the vector of temporal sequence, time feels as if it is approaching, much more gracefully and gently, from the future, not vacant but rich with pre-figured possibilities, which we can shape in various ways though not fully control. In the former case, time can often seem herky-jerky, like plates grinding at a fault line, lunging forward from time to time, often only via exertions of will. In the latter case it seems simply to flow forward-toward/from-the-future, as it were, making itself available as a resource. Time, in other words, becomes an aspect of consciousness instilled from the outside-in, and by that means serves as a medium for the curious universe to witness itself from the inside-out in a sustained manner. This provides a possible starting point to think about one of the enduring conundrums in mathematical representations of the universe, which don't require time to move in only one direction (i.e., they operate equally moving "forward" or "backward" in time) as it does for us, regulated strictly forward by entropy at the macro-level and the collapse of the wave-function at the moment of observation at the quantum level.

5.

All of this tends to call into crisis our most stereotypical experiences of what we call a "self." I would argue (as many, many other poets and philosophers have) that the self-as-identity-center is an entirely human construction, a particularly intense one in Western systems, one that allows us to operate under the illusion that our experiences are proprietary, our own, privately originated at one extreme or culturally induced at the other, both commonplace systems for defining identity

formation in Western culture. This sense of unitary individuation is inescapable to some degree, a by-product of our autonomous embodiment in the material world. It takes active work to counter that instinctive way of imagining and experiencing identity as a personal rather than cosmic phenomenon, just as it takes active work to imagine an atom as an array of interactive probability waves rather than a planetary system of "hard" particles.

Many Eastern gurus and Western mystics have striven mightily to elide, deconstruct, override or escape from the "delusion" of selfhood. One of the purposes and consequences of this work is to come into an ecstatic sense of communion with the universe, in effect (in the context of this conversation) to forego personal experience in order to lend one's consciousness to the universe as a means for experiencing itself. Thereby, both universe and self become simultaneous, can see, hear, smell, taste, feel what their embodied forms experience and understand when they merge. A good example of this conflation is in the *Upanishads*, at least as I read it naively, where the word that is translated into English as "self" seems sometimes to be the whole of the universe, sometimes God, and sometimes just the individual internal structure each of us inhabits uniquely.

The fact that I have not been able to achieve such a transcendent state perfectly or durably does not diminish my confidence that it is both possible and desirable to do so. Whether quantum theorists have ambitions along these lines is arguable. But the greatest among them do often tend to lend their personal, private selves to the higher, selfless goals that modern

scientific inquiry ideally endorses and promotes. And anyone who has used high-level mathematics to explore one of the universe's subtler expressions knows what it feels like to become gradually more selfless until finally yielding fully to the enthrallingly dialogical effects of that particular discourse, and thereby to the cosmos on whose behalf it is being deployed.

There is a certain kind of generative chaos we experience once we destabilize the singular, often despotic, self that is our inheritance from Cartesian Modernism (and it's easier to accomplish that than you might think). My favorite quote along these lines is this one from Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, which I use in my book *Living Hidden* to explore androgynous states of identity, a good first move toward self-deconstruction:

> *When this happened, Orlando heaved a sigh of relief, lit a cigarette, and puffed for a minute or two in silence. Then she called hesitatingly, as if the person she wanted might not be there, 'Orlando?' For if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not — Heaven help us — all having lodgment at one time or another in the human spirit? Some say two thousand and fifty-two. So that it is the most usual thing in the world for a person to call, directly they are alone, 'Orlando?' (if that is one's name) meaning by that, 'Come, come! I'm sick to death of this particular self. I want another.'*
>
> *. . . but what appeared certain (for we are now in the region of 'perhaps' and 'appears') was that the one she needed most kept aloof, for she was, to hear her talk, changing her selves as quickly as she drove — there was a new one at every corner — as happens when, for some*

> *unaccountable reason, the conscious self, which is the uppermost, and has the power to desire, wishes to be nothing but one self. This is what some people call the true self, and it is, they say, compact of all the selves we have it in us to be; commanded and locked up by the Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls them all.* (174-175)

Decommissioning the Captain is only a step, of course, in the process of escaping from the delusion of selfhood. But it is an important one, and quite a lot of fun in its own right, as this passage and Woolf's book make clear. And you can get there via both Taoism and quantum mechanics.

6.

Language is the principal medium by which we share insights and understandings about the worlds we witness, most especially via poetry, the currency for "awakening" in Hinton's terms, in my epigraph. That is true even (maybe especially) when the ambition of the proffered discourse is to undermine, deconstruct, supersede, or even void the very language that conveys those insights and understandings. The question for the poet then becomes how to find a discourse that can serve as a conveyance to the outer limits of language and then dismantle itself, or simply evaporate, opening a portal to what is outside it. Both Taoist poets and quantum theorists deploy language in similarly self-subversive ways toward that end.

Postmodernist ideologies may suggest that this is impossible, but there are multiple other historical ways

of thinking about the nature and function of language. In many of those, figurative discourses (among which I include mathematics) are gifted with this transfigurative and liberatory power.

Which gets to the problem at hand (for me personally) at the moment, and why I started to write this piece. As a friend aptly noticed, in my most recent poems I seem to be turning more and more to anthropomorphic features to unveil/reveal what I experience of the outside world on my walks. This includes, at the extreme, devices for personification, all of which seems at odds with my apparent project to disappear from the landscape enough to allow the universe to use my consciousness to witness itself and provide me with some spare language to share its observations. This concerns me, of course, even as I know it is an inescapable condition of my consciousness, which has inherited and inhabits a linguistic system fully ensconced in the human universe.

Some of the shorter poems in my book *slights: my new tiny poems from here not there* strive to deploy a highly stripped-down discourse, one that might more easily allow the "objective" world to come into presence more for itself than for me. There are severe limits, of course, on the degree to which that is possible, given what I am and what language is. Lately I seem to be abandoning the more strenuous version of that discipline in favor of a lusher and more sensuous discourse, one that, again inevitably, is going to appear to be more rather than less anthropomorphic.

There has been an on-and-off argument pertinent to all of this in English-language poetics for a couple of hundred years now, which touches here and there on

the propriety of using anthropomorphized discourse to convey the non-human universe. It often revolves around the problem of the "object" or "thing," sometimes by contrast with the "self" or "emotion." The most recent philosophical movement along these lines is object-oriented-ontology, the first and final terms of which (to me) index its frontal argument with most postmodernist systems, which are (to my way of reading them) subject- and epistemology-oriented. I am not a philosopher, so engaging with that argument in detail would be foolhardy. But I know enough about both movements to have noticed that poets/poetry/poetics play a minor role, often none at all, in most of the treatments, a stunning oversight given the fundamental problems at hand from either point of view, problems poets have long been negotiating, perhaps more haphazardly and less strictly than philosophers would prefer, but still quite perceptively.

I've written more specifically about the poetic sensibility—in relation for example to sublimity, objectivity, dreaming, perception, identity, and transcendence, et al.—in several of my books. This essay and the book it now joins add another layer to my overall argument on behalf of the primacy of poetry among verbal media, with poetry conceived not solely as a narrow genre or even a discourse, but as a way of being in the world, of awakening to it and allowing it to awaken, via our presence, to itself, one that might well issue forth from time to time in public expressions via things we name as "poems," but that can be equally and powerfully transacted in quiet, even silent, privacy, contemplatively, on behalf of the most fundamental human desires and ambitions to come to "know" not simply and solely about ourselves or simply and solely

about the worlds we inhabit and encounter, but to reside at the boundary lines where those two seemingly distinct phenomena fuse and become one, the curious self in service of the curious cosmos, and vice-versa.

All of which is simply to say, in relation to my recent turn toward anthropomorphism: In poetry, in any linguistic enterprise, in any creative human enterprise, anthropomorphism is inescapable, inevitable. We are "anthropos" after all, as are all of our interventions and inventions. So it is a matter of degree. If you seek to "transcend" such limitations, there are avenues to explore: Eastern and Western mystic traditions offer several options, as does quantum mechanics. And, I would argue, poetry does as well, as long as you use poetic composition and reception not to render and contain experience linguistically, or to expropriate things to serve some ulterior psychological purpose, but to ride language to the outer borders of consciousness, where it shares itself with the universe, until it reveals what resides wordlessly beyond that periphery, close enough to simply step out with wonderment into that vast "emptiness," the generative "absence" turning into "presence," that both Taoist poets and quantum physicists seem (to me) to understand and agree is at the heart of the world we inhabit here.

Seeing Another Way Past Self-extinction

1.

August 13, 2023

> *For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies.*

William Wordsworth said this in his famous preface to *Lyrical Ballads* over 200 years ago. One wonders what he would think of all of this in our own time, where "great national events . . . daily taking place" and "rapid communication" about them have been amplified exponentially, along with the "craving for extraordinary incident" as an anodyne for the "almost savage torpor" this inundation of "news" induces as it "gratifies." I'm not sure his nervous system could survive it. For him, the antidote (as opposed to anodyne) for this addiction to the "extraordinary" was poetry, specifically his, or at least the mode of poetry that he and his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge enacted in this now-famous little book, which, after a halting and humble start, went on to influence not

just a whole generation of British poets immediately thereafter—Keats, Shelley, Byron, etc.—but has cast a light (or some might argue a shadow) over poetry written in English ever since, in that this book opens a series of arguments—about subject matter and style, most obviously, but also about epistemology, i.e., how does/should a poet approach the natural world, including those of us who people it, most ethically and morally—that has been ongoing ever since.

The word I want to substitute for Wordsworth's "extraordinary incident" is "spectacle," which gives what he is obviously pointing toward a more local and specific focus, and which also has inbuilt etymological elements useful to what I want to explore here, the human inclination to create, seek out, and chronically indulge in these kinds of events. According to Wikipedia:

> *In general, spectacle refers to an event that is memorable for the appearance it creates. Derived in Middle English from c. 1340 as "specially prepared or arranged display" it was borrowed from Old French spectacle, itself a reflection of the Latin spectaculum "a show" from spectare "to view, watch" frequentative form of specere "to look at."*

The terms that interest me here imply its artificiality: "appearance," "prepared or arranged display," and "show," all of which are human constructions either phenomenologically or aesthetically. And they also imply a (relatively) passive viewer, reacting responsively from an extrinsic vantage point, an "audience" standing apart from the "show" in other words.

All of this is repeated and amplified in this tracing of the word's roots from the *Online Etymology Dictionary*:

*mid-14c., "public entertainment, specially prepared or arranged display," from Old French spectacle "sight, spectacle, Roman games" (13c.), from Latin spectaculum "a public show, spectacle, place from which shows are seen," from spectare "to view, watch, behold," frequentative form of specere "to look at" (from PIE root *spek- "to observe").*

The sense of "object of public contempt, derision or wonderment" is from mid-14c.

The multiple repetitions of the word "public" and the specific reference to the "Roman games" emphasize the artificiality and extremity of the spectacular, and again the (relatively) passive role of the observer, as if the latter, which is any of us, needs a Red Bull-type jolt just to shake off our torpor, entering a state of excitement that is likely to last only as long as the event itself, which will create a desire to repeat the experience whenever that torpor returns.

I have this on my mind now because of my visit yesterday to Mount Rainier, certainly a centerpiece spectacle in the Pacific Northwest. I can see Mount Rainier, 60 miles off, from various vantage points in Olympia, where I live now, an awesome sight. I wanted to see what it looked like up close, under the assumption that its immediacy would amplify its impact exponentially, awesome multiplied into spectacular. The drive up there from Olympia takes more than an hour and half along an array of narrow, windy roads. Suddenly, when I got near the park there was a traffic jam. A real traffic jam. Like rush hour on I-5. I thought initially there must be an accident ahead, but it was, I would ultimately discover, simply an ultra-slow

admission process at the park's gate that led to this backup. It took me an additional 40 minutes just to enter and find a place to park, which was overrun with tourists, droves of them arriving in cars, buses, vans, and then milling around on foot to take some photos and enjoy a snack, super-sightseers just like me seeking similarly I assume to be stunned out of their torpor by this magnificent mountain of ice. My guess is that very few of us were, though, including me. We behaved more like customers at a high-end retail store: pay the fare, "buy" the product and take the receipt, in this case that obligatory photo from one of the staged platforms, our positions as consumers alienating us all the while from what we were there to acquire.

Given all the traffic, I was unable, in a suitably timely way, to get far enough up into the park to see anything more than the tip of the glacial peak, even less of it than I can see back in Olympia. It was all so frustrating and disappointing. I resented all these others there, these "interlopers," obstructing my imagined experience, knowing full well that I was one of them, an insight that added to my frustration and disappointment. Rather than driving the extra hour it might take to get to a vantage point where the mountain would take my breath away, I turned around and went back home, feeling defeated. All of this has gotten me thinking about the diversionary role such "spectacles," natural or otherwise, play in the enervating drama that is the unraveling of the American democracy in our ongoing slo-mo civil war, akin at least in general volatility to the "great national events" Wordsworth alludes to in his own time.

It may seem a stretch to think of Mount Rainier as a "specially prepared or arranged display," a pre-existing

natural monolith just sitting there by itself as itself. But if you visit this National Park, or any other, you know very quickly that what was once there as itself by itself has been fully commodified, becoming "public," a "show" "staged" by an elaborate system of cultural, economic and political forces for easy human consumption, all that hardscaping to keep people safely on paths and to minimize their effort to maximize the view, all the promotional and informational material pre-formatting it, enough to justify the $30 fee it takes just to drive through the front gate. And maybe even incite you to pay another $30 for a little tin cup in the gift store. In other words, Rainier is more like a Roman Game now than a mountain of ice, as hordes of somnambulant tourists, including me, can testify, all herding about today hoping to be awakened by an amazing spectacle.

I've been taking more of these little day trips lately, at the urging of a friend who said such "changes of scenery" would do me good. She mentioned half a dozen places that I should have on my travel itinerary toward that end. I tried to explain to her that I am just temperamentally different from that. I am by nature a person who roots myself deeply wherever I happen to be living. I prefer to walk rather than drive which means all of my favorite places are nearby, I visit them repeatedly, and know them quite intimately. All of this is both soothing and endlessly interesting to me. Most others have a hard time grasping this, thinking of me more as a "stick in the mud" I suppose than an indigenous presence inspiriting my local home. But a few days later I decided to check out some the places she mentioned, just to see for myself whether any of these "changes of scenery" would in fact awaken or astound me in ways my local habitat doesn't. I have now visited a number of the natural destination sites and, along

the way, a number of the towns she mentioned, which were interesting, but each in its own way almost as frustrating and disappointing to me as Mount Rainier was yesterday. Yes, the scenery had changed, but I hadn't, not the slightest bit, at least not in a good way—frustrated and disappointed are hardly desirable outcomes—much less so in fact than I do in the various places I walk through repeatedly on a daily basis here, which always change me in salutary ways, occasionally quite dramatically, as you know if you have read any of my previous books. So I doubt I will return to any of them. Or add more such destinations to my must-see list.

Which got me wondering what it is that makes the things and places I see over and over so much more fascinating for me—far more so than one-off spectacles long drives away—than it does for others? And why all of this is opposite for them. The only way the term spectacle even remotely applies to the things and places I visit repeatedly is in its deepest etymological sense, just seeing what's right there in front of my eyes, without all the hoopla of staging, ever-surprising, always enthralling, more and more so the more often I visit them. Clearly these "sceneries" never "change," or do at a relatively glacial pace, seasonally or over many years. So what is it that changes for me in this aggregation of repeated witnessings? And why do others prefer destination-one-offs to accomplish something similar?

Here's what I was thinking this morning: There are two different kinds of seeing in play here. On one side of the spectrum of witnessing, the socially normative one, change is inwardly motivated by something akin to what Wordsworth calls "torpor:" One becomes inured to one's immediate environment and seeks out a remote stimulus

to disrupt routinized viewing patterns therapeutically; then returns "home" with revived eyes and a good story, that foundational currency of the social economy, to share with others. When these effects wear off, the urge to roam returns. Thus the need for a continuous stream of spectacles, that must-see list. For these reasons, I decided to call this mode of viewing "ego-centric," the hypen added to diminish the negative connotations we tend to associate with that term.

On the other side of the spectrum, where I and others like me live, change is instigated outwardly, often unconsciously, by place, especially familiar places, where our eyes are at most at "home." To such eyes, local scenes somehow appear new and different every time we encounter them, an ongoing relationship that generates a story we tell to ourselves, if we tell one at all; and remote one-offs pale by comparison. For these reasons, I decided to call this mode of viewing "eco-centric," the hyphen added to minimize the impact of the climate-change-related volatilities that currently attach to that term.

This is of course a spectrum with variations in intensity across the range. But it seemed to me this morning that the balance tends to fall on one side or the other, without a great deal of inter-mixing. For ego-centric viewers, local places lose their luster over time and "must-sees" provide dramatic and exciting anodynes. For eco-centric viewers, it is opposite. Both of these modes of viewing are equally enjoyable, even addictive. And both are at least potentially equal in their efficacy at effecting some kind of change. But they operate in different paradigms for organizing the relationship between a seer and what she sees. The ego-centric paradigm is the standard Western perspectival model: humankind stands aside from the rest of the

natural world, which proffers dramatic "changes of scenery" for us to appreciate, and the portal to those is most often remote, requiring travel. The eco-centric paradigm, more akin to the Indigenous perspectival model, assumes that humankind is integral and in intimate relationship with everything on earth, and the portal to all of that is what's right at hand. Ego-centrism is additive—multiple events compiled separately over time, each with a singularly salient effect, like a sine wave, up and down rhythmically; eco-centrism is cumulative—multiple events merging together over time into one increasingly salient effect, a steadily rising curve. The closer one is to either extreme on the spectrum, the less likely she is to find the alternative method useful or interesting, or sometimes even tolerable, as an inspiration for change. The former may seem too cliched for one inclined to the latter, the latter too boring for one inclined to the former.

2.

August 14, 2023

> *Nor let this necessity of producing immediate pleasure be considered as a degradation of the Poet's art. It is far otherwise. It is an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe, an acknowledgement the more sincere, because not formal, but indirect; it is a task light and easy to him [sic] who looks at the world in the spirit of love . . .*

William Wordsworth again, same preface. One of the keynotes of Wordsworth's method, and of Romantic

poetics in general, is pleasure. He spends a lot of time in this preface conceptualizing what that term means to him, all of which has very little to do in the end with stereotypical cultural notions about pleasure, i.e., valorizing desirable bodily sensations. It's not that he locates pleasure outside the body, it's more that his version has an almost ascetic austerity to it by comparison with the standard modes of gratification we typically associate with such experiences, his focus always more on Nature (capital N in his system) and the broader community of others whom the Poet (capital P in his system) speaks both with and for. As he says immediately after the above quote:

> *. . . further, it is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man [sic], to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he [sic] knows, and feels, and lives, and moves. We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure . . .*

In other words, pleasure is what brings humans into genuine communion with one another, and poetry is one of its primary vehicles. Poetry of the sort Wordsworth recommends has both a universal aspect in its reach—an inbuilt desire to speak clearly what everyone feels but may not be able to put into words—and an everydayness in its expression, what he calls "the language of the common man," the very feature of this collection that he assumes will make it unrecognizable as poetry to connoisseurs of that genre in his day. As he explains:

> *They who have been accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will, no doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and*

> *awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to inquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.*

It may seem hard for us to grasp this anxiety, given how familiar, almost universal, his approach to poetry and poetics has become. It is the poetry of the 18th century, the acerbic saline sea into which this little book sets sail, that is more likely to seem alien to us.

So where am I going with all of this? I just came in from my front yard after sitting for about a half hour with my morning tea watching the sky for signs of this year's Perseid meteor shower. When daylight savings time kicked in last spring—that hour forward-leaping that should have moved my bedtime later—my body for some reason went in the opposite direction, falling back. So instead of going to sleep around 10 PM I started to get tired enough to sleep at 8 PM. Since I have no schedule to keep, I can sleep and get up as whimsically as I want, so I've made no effort to de-regulate this regimen, which means I now often get up between 3 and 4 AM. I didn't say "wake up" because I tend to wake up repeatedly during the night, after almost every REM cycle, which is why I remember so many of my dreams so vividly, as you know if you have read my previous work. I mention that here because it will become pertinent in this essay at some point, after my fingers have typed their way toward it at their leisure.

The weather here this summer has been consistently gorgeous, August especially so. At 3 AM it is tee-shirt warm enough to sit in the front yard and stare at the sky in complete comfort. I have a reclining lawn chair situated under a tree-size rhododendron bush in the front corner of my yard because it is in the shade for much of the

day—I sometimes sit there to read—and is sheltered from the streetlight on the corner of Bigelow and Garrison streets—which cuts down the light pollution in the middle of the night. The skies have been brilliantly clear lately, so from that vantage point, reclining, I can see many stars. And the last two nights I've been able to see the ongoing Perseid meteor shower. Olympia is, of course, a small city, so there is a lot of ambient light around, which means I see a streak of light flash by maybe once every 2-3 minutes, quite bright, unmistakably meteoric, but so instant it's almost as if it didn't happen. In the intervals between, I just look at the stars, arranging them according to my daily whims. The time I spend watching all of this is, for me, an interim of utter and complete pleasure, "light and easy," borrowing Wordsworth's words.

I resist calling what I've just seen a spectacle because it lacks the most obvious features of one: It is not "public," nor is it "prepared or staged" in any obvious way. Just me alone with me in my front yard sitting still while I drink my morning tea. The same experience would more likely qualify as a spectacle, for example, if I drove out to Mount Rainier to witness the Perseids in all their glory. This week in fact, my daughter Bridget tells me, hordes of people did just that, drove to Mount Rainer to view the Perseids, in the process littering the mountainside with trash, trampling over meadows of native flora, and, given their numbers and the paucity of space, quadruple parking, creating exiting gridlock. I have no idea how many streaks of light they might have seen there or at what frequency. And I never will because I'm not going to do that. But I'm inclined to think that, while it would make a grander story to report to others, it would not be or feel any more impactful for me than what I just watched from my front

yard. I'd more likely end up frustrated and disappointed, especially if I was parked in by rows of cars.

. . .

I'm ambivalent right now about what might be the best next move to keep this essay flowing along. At moments like this, my head empty, what "plan" I may have had seemingly scuppered, I tend to do one of two things: I write about one of my morning walks (I've just now come back from today's, daybreak, downtown, along the boardwalk, over to the salmon-run overlook—still too early for that—very beautiful). Or I write about my dreams. I have tons of those and, if I stop to take note of them, I remember them in quite vivid detail. Either of those will work to open a path forward. I think I'll do the latter because one series of dreams, from last week, has been on my mind ever since, my hoping to fathom what it may be trying to tell me.

One of the distinctive features my dreamwork took on this summer is this: I will have a sequence of dreams that are quite volatile, often darkly so, over the course of the night, with only incidental connections to one another or to any specific theme. But when I wake up there is a very simple aphoristic thought in my head, sometimes voiced, one that I take to be their "interpretation." This sequence was dream after dream in different settings where I was rushing about breathlessly in crowded places, quite nicely dressed but with shoes so worn-out, almost in tatters, that they kept slipping off, especially the right one, forcing me to stop over and over to right them. I kept asking people where I might find a shoe store to correct this problem, to no avail. I woke to a voice telling me: "I know who you

are, and I'm so happy to have spent this time with you," which seems utterly disconnected from those dreams.

I did Google some dream interpretation sites to see what shoes might mean symbolically. But what really interested me in all of this was that voice, how the sentiment it expressed was most welcome to me. I'm not a big fan of Freud or his theories. But that voice is a pretty good example of "wish fulfillment" for me. I am, admittedly, overly sensitive about, and probably exaggerate, the ways in which I feel misunderstood, misread, or simply reduced to a caricature of myself in my interactions with others. And I have a correspondingly deep longing to be "seen," which I've written about repeatedly, most vividly in the scene that closes my book *In Dreams*, where a whale leaps unexpectedly from the sea I'm overlooking, its huge eye inches from mine, seeing all the way to my deepest inner reaches as I see to its deepest inner reaches, a euphoric moment for both of us. I suspect that many others, particularly those on my end of the social spectrum who live solitary lives feel likewise. So to have another voice say as credibly as this one did that "I know who you are" is literally a "dream come true" for me. Why this was the outcome of all that running around in search of new shoes eludes me. I'm just grateful for that summary statement, which I immediately concluded was not some extrinsic agent validating me, but simply one aspect of "me"—the "I"— talking to another aspect of "me"—the "you."

I've written about such I-you dynamics repeatedly over the years—often turning to poets like Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, who are as obsessively preoccupied as I am in trying to fathom how these distinct aspects of identity relate to one another (in Whitman's case) or don't (in Dickinson's case.) There are any number of

conventional cultural models for conceptualizing this odd "otherness" that characterizes the human experience of "self": the Socratic interrogator who prods the "you" to "know thyself," a willed creation; the Freudian unconscious, author of dreams, surfacing momentarily to summarize them, the "wish fulfillment" function I just mentioned; the Jungian collective unconscious that expands the temporal range of this realm exponentially; the aboriginal "dreamtime" or "everywhen," which inverts the relationship between these individual and collective worlds of experience; Virginia Woolf's more playful 2052 others in 76 different times competing in there for momentary supremacy; an even more playful one from one of the dreams I reported on in *Harvest*, that dreamt-up quantum theorist naming this other as my "phantom thespian" (remote actor) that accompanies me (everyone else has one, too) here, an ultra-large-scale version of quantum entanglement, providing a built-in "social network" as it were, such that I am always amicably other to myself, therefore never alone. Walt Whitman's assertion in "Song of Myself" that "every atom that belongs to me as good belongs to you" can be read via this figure, literally I mean, Walt's quantum partner talking back to him, instead of the more customary author/reader paradigm.

This morning it felt to me as if these two distinct parts of me were living intimately together symbiotically and androgynously: one, a "young" one, my "you," entirely personal, fresh when I was born, whom I've self-created in all of "his" details as I've lived my life; the other, an "old" one, my "I," which became conjoined with me at birth or somewhere along the way in the hopes that my experiences might have a salutary effect on her own journey toward whatever level of enlightenment she was

pursuing. Where this second self might come from or go is a conundrum that many religious systems, gurus, philosophers, and poets, including Wordsworth, have speculated about variously, under terms like reincarnation, transmigration, and metempsychosis.

I'm skeptical about this multi-life model to be honest, would rather it not be so. One life in this world is quite enough, thank you. But if I (my now partially evolved "you") have to come back, I hope it will be to join more and more intelligent, passionate, sensitive, and loving beings along the way. I've quite enjoyed being "me," but I'm sure there are hundreds of human levels above mine. And I'm equally sure there are many other presences superior to humans, like whales and elephants, for example, those always nearby "ancestors" in Indigenous cultures, both a foundation for and an expression of their reverence for the natural world. And that's only with earth as a destination. I'm also sure there are in this universe other worlds with embodied presences that make what we are, even at our best, seem like chump change. Or chimp change! And there may be many other universes, too. If so, that's what I want more of. Not a heavenly other- or nether-world, but the kingdom of heaven, which, as I've said repeatedly, I (and Jesus, and many others) believe is right here, right now, any time we want it, inside turning out, outside turning in.

Wordsworth says in his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" that we come into this world "trailing clouds of glory," initiating a life that "is but a sleep and a forgetting." Socrates says something similar, how what we come to know here is a recollection of what we knew up there in the heavenly circuit before we got here, a process of recovery that takes a lot of hard

work. If there happens to be a transcendent after-life or between-lives, I think just opposite: We leave this world trailing whatever clouds of glory we've been able to accrue and enter a realm that is a sleep and a forgetting waiting for another chance at the lottery of life, where all the action it. But for the time being all I can say with some confidence is that the "I" who spoke to me so lovingly that morning has been as eager to get to know me in a very deep way as I am to get to know her, and was telling me she was glad to have spent her time in my company, validating in some way the work I've been doing toward self-renovation over my lifetime, most especially these last eight years. That made me very happy, to feel so seen, so known, very happy, indeed.

3.

August 15, 2023

> *Not that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formerly conceived; but habits of meditation have, I trust, so prompted and regulated my feelings, that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite my feelings, will be found to carry along with them a purpose. If this opinion be erroneous, I can have little right to the name of a Poet. For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man [sic] who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.*

Again from Wordsworth's preface, his first pass at a definition of "good poetry"—the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"—which he elaborates later in the essay into his method for producing a legitimately Romantic poem, that famous "emotion recollected in tranquillity" trope that T.S. Eliot takes such umbrage at. Eliot misses the point, though, by ignoring the rest of that passage, which defines the desultory path along which a Romantic poem emerges from the meager beginnings of that original "emotion," morphing, via "contemplation," into the poetic one that finally "overflows," a good few steps away from where it all started:

> *I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on . . .*

I mention all of that because I feel like this essay is now taking a similarly desultory path, more leading me than I am leading it, as is so often the case with my writing lately, driven by prior "habits of meditation" rather than a "purpose formerly conceived," by "spontaneous overflow" rather than planned composition. A few pages back I gave the lead some slack and now the essay is no longer "mine." So I'll let it meander for a while.

. . .

It's 3:37 AM. I'm just in from another very pleasant stint sky-gazing in my yard. No Perseid meteor streaks today, so I spent my tea-time just staring at the stars. Two things became clearer to me. One of them was the stars. As I said, there is considerable light pollution in my front yard, no matter how well I shield my chair from it. Some stars appear bright and obvious, others only emerge after I stare in their direction for a while. This made me realize that human eyes resemble modern telescopes in the sense that they need to spend enough time "looking" at those bits of sky to accumulate enough photons for their tiny lights to flicker on. It is quite mesmerizing, a highly specialized form of "listening." Look away, then come back, and eyes need to start all over, having no memory of the light they just saw. All of this made me further realize that "seeing" anything or anyone in a deep enough way for their light to flicker on takes patience, time and close attention, this intense form of listening that may, in time, allow one to say with confidence that "I know who you are." And that knowledge is similarly transient when we look away.

I assume my experience of myself through time is like most people's: Each day seems to have an almost epic aspect as it pertains to self-change. Challenges emerge and are addressed, often overcome. Long-term personal struggles continue apace toward some distant resolution, like railroad tracks I can see merging at a far horizon, various "stops" along the way to mark progress, though the vanishing point always remains elusively at that far horizon. True insight into another, the kind that leads to deep understanding—a mode of love (in its non-filial and non-romantic sense) so rare in our culture—requires precisely the sort of listening I just described for seeing a

distant star: one's whole body, all its receptors, "on," one's identity-center, the "I" that wants what it wants, "off."

Live-in partners can do this kind of work for one another, if there is true love there, via day-to-day mutual storytelling, for example, always updating. Absent that or something like it, it is important to do that for oneself, which is what I do, in part by making the things I make and then "listening" to them over and over to learn what they have to teach me about me, and in part simply by treating myself with the same intimate care I yearn for. I am literally stunned by how often I will explain to another, who claims to want to know, as clearly as I can, who I am, why I am that way, what are the best ways to come to know me—which is not easy to do, by the way, given the poverty of the primary medium we have for that, language—and nothing changes. I mean at all. They continue to operate on a set of assumptions about me that I have just explained, as politely as possible, are fundamentally errant. All I can do in response is repeat my personal mantra over and over to myself, "Don't do that, Paul. Do not do that!"

The other thing that became clearer to me was more ephemeral. I mentioned yesterday the "two-spirit" theory that I concocted based on my dreams the other night. Today, sitting still in the dark on that chair, it all got rejiggered, taking me back to embodiment, my own, which is where I prefer to be. I decided that the "I" was more likely the "Paul" in that equation and the "you" was this unbelievably sophisticated organism I have been gifted with here, all of its antennae and receptors and processors collaborating to produce the extraordinary experience of being alive. At that moment, sitting still in the dark, my whole being felt electrified, totally "on:" eyes,

ears, heart, mind, even skin, ultra-sensitive, this other "me" with (not within) whom "I" cohabit here.

One of the things this made me wonder about is why I, like many, maybe most human others, crave change, enough so to invest considerable energy in that process, which often involves sacrifice. No matter how happy I might feel or how far I've advanced through my aspirational itinerary, that craving never seems to diminish. I'll call this desire "the will to change," to differentiate it from the sort of changes that occur automatically, routinely, accidentally in the natural world. Willed change requires planning and discipline. For some reason, despite its difficulties, that produces pleasure and, for me, sometimes leads to poetry which means it's good.

Lately, the last 8 years, since Carol passed, that craving has been insatiable. And since I retired, it has become my "profession" as it were. So it takes a lot of ongoing work—paying attention, reflecting, thinking, reading—just to keep up with myself. And often writing. Which correspondingly means that most others I know quite quickly get out of synch with this "Paul" I am always making and remaking, enough so that I often feel estranged from them when we reconnect, as if they're operating with an outdated version of me and it will take some time to update it, get back on the same page at it were.

I noticed this sense of disconnect almost immediately after Carol died, a tectonic event in my life, one that changed my continental configuration drastically and all at once. When I encountered others in the immediate aftermath, my world totally remapped, theirs still the same, I felt they were literally unable to "see me," let alone "know who I

was," this now-new version of me produced instantly by the trauma of my loss. I described my social interactions back then—in *This Fall*—as feeling like I was watching myself on TV, the old me playing his scripted part conversationally, the "real" me simply a viewer excised from the scene. Given my general solitude I am once again outside the "tube"-world (more pleasantly than pathologically now), most often just my alter-Paul with me, listening to, learning from, getting to know who this Paul is and what he is up to here. And vice-versa. In a space like that, everything freely given in a generous back and forth, estrangement seems to evaporate in an aura of self-recognition.

Early this year I created an Instagram page where I post one of what I call "my tiny poems from olympia" about twice a week. Yesterday I decided to make one based on two photos I took of the sunrise, seen through my dining room window, one in its full fluorescence, one at its point of evanescence. I wanted to say something about the deleterious effects of craving more than what is given and decided to use a quote that Carol borrowed from some self-help program she was practicing back in the 90s: "If you want, there is never enough," which is of course true and a worthy aphorism to live by. Wanting has much less volatility about it than craving so seemed better suited to my purpose. But something about that quote didn't feel quite fitting to those photos, too negative mainly is what I thought. So I tinkered with it and ended up with this: [first photo] "if you never want more . . ." [second photo] ". . . there is always enough," so much better I thought both in this application and as an aphorism to live by. If I never want more than what's right in front of me, there will always be enough.

Pertinent to this: Last night I had a dream in which I was caught up in an immense flood, water rushing and gushing everywhere. People were being washed away or slipping and sliding down steep rock inclines. One man ended up on an inaccessible ledge with an obvious shoulder injury that prevented him from trying to climb back up. He was waiting glumly for help that he knew might never arrive. I watched all of this quite dispassionately, confident I could traverse the deluge to some safer place. As I tried to navigate the elaborate array of intersecting walkways, small decks, and narrow boardwalks that I was caught among, the water kept rising and washing them away underfoot, one by one, until I was simply afloat with no foundation at all. A man in a boat reached out a paddle, which I grabbed, and he dragged me to what at first seemed like higher ground. I ferreted around in my wallet to give him a good tip, which he took, then showed to his friends offering to take them out for a drink. I assumed I was now safe, but as soon as I tried to walk off, the water surged up around me and I was once again afloat. I dog-paddled into and through it looking for a way out I couldn't see. Then I woke up.

The odd thing about all of this is, beginning to end, I was never once either cold (I don't have an excess of "meat on my bones" so have always been cold while swimming) or the slightest bit afraid, I mean utterly calm, confident. When I woke, not having reached *terra firma*, my inner voice said simply: "There is no way back now." What I took this to mean, quite happily, was that I was finally free of my attachments to the various "pasts" that have been afflicting me since I retired and moved out west, all now washed away with that patchwork of rickety planks I was navigating as I tried to find a way. I may still be treading water, I thought, but at least I'm not trapped in an Escher

maze that goes nowhere. The only way available "now" was forward, where sooner or later some dry ground would rise up under my feet allowing me walk out of the shallows renewed, not a place heavily hardscaped ahead of time, like the one I left behind, or like Mount Rainier, staged, premade, orchestrated toward a "spectacle," but a forest lush with great trees and endless savannas of ferns, just like the one I plan to walk through later this morning. And that man on the ledge? Maybe that was me 8 years ago, rescued now not by going back but by "going with the flow" as it were.

. . .

I'm back now from that walk, a miraculous crack-of-dawn walk at Woodard Bay. I wasn't going to write anything about it until that sentence entered my head near the end of the walk. I liked the sound of it, all the alliteration. Its first iteration was missing the word "miraculous." When that word entered the scene on my way in the door I just couldn't resist typing it up. Miraculous seemed at first a word I had inserted just for sound and rhythm, superficially poetic, I mean. But once it was ensconced it got me thinking about my walk through that lens. Especially the difference between miraculous and spectacular, an alternative word that would have sounded just as good in that sentence but would have been wrong. I'm so happy it did.

It was quite warm here yesterday—high 90s—and will be again today, which is why I was walking at daybreak. Soon as I got out of the car I was mesmerized, first by the water, perfectly still (it seemed), like blued steel with a verdigris filigree embossed on its surface, the bayside trees flowing out to make the water seem fathomless. As I

started walking I saw a leaf or two on the water's surface moving slowly out with the tide, more the illusion of motion than motion itself. The forest was, likewise, serenely still in the half light of dawn, like walking in a glassed-in conservatory, air motionless. Nothing moved but me, so soothing. I greeted my usual trees in the usual way, no big deal, all those landmark moments along the way. By the time I got to Henderson Inlet the sun was fully up, blindingly bright. A couple of seals plopped into the water, about a half dozen more still slumbering on the mid-bay dock they use as a haul-out. A kingfisher. A few noisy gulls. Some action, but slow motion.

At the Woodard Bay side of the point I stood for a while watching the hundreds of cormorants perched atop the skeletal fir trees their guano has defoliated over the years, stock still, like they were sleeping rather than staging for flights out to fish. I was hoping they'd take flight in numbers, all at once, cacophonously, the way I saw them do earlier this summer about this time of morning, quietude to riotous in a matter of seconds. I stood there for quite a while waiting, the scene still static as a painting, as calm and happy as it's possible for me to be. That's the miracle part. Nothing moving. Everything so beautiful.

4.

August 16, 2023

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:

So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

William Wordsworth

I woke early again today, was out in my lawn chair with a cup of tea by 4 AM. The tapestry of stars overhead was shifted aside from the one I watched the previous two nights, down and slightly to the right from my perspective under the rhododendron tree. It took me a minute or two to recalculate it all, then I settled into about a half hour of static viewing, no Perseids, nothing moving, up there, down here, so soothing. I'm now several days into my regimen living under the aegis of that recently composed aphorism about wanting and enoughness. I was thinking while I was sitting there about how different "never wanting more" is from "not wanting anything." In the former case, not only is what's there enough, it is in fact everything, all you could possibly want right then. The trajectory of "not wanting anything," on the other hand, which resembles a Buddhist-mediative state of mind while sitting, is always subtractive, moving ideally toward "nothing," a concept I've written about copiously and favorably in a couple of my recent books. Today it struck me that no matter how appealing "nothing" might be, and it is quite appealing, "everything" is better.

An hour or so later, while I was making my bed, I heard the first seagulls squawking as they headed toward the bay

to eat. I love that sound, in part because it reminds me of my family vacations on the Delaware shore, first just me and Carol, then also with Bridget, then also with her brother Joe. I recall how relaxing it was falling asleep to the rhythm of waves crashing or lapping on the beach outside our window and then waking up to the raucous gulls out and about.

Just after sunrise I headed out to Woodard Bay again. On the drive out I listened for the gazillionth time to the playlist of Buddy Holly songs I "covered" a few years ago. This may seem an almost puerile activity, listening: 1) to my own voice instead of his, and 2) to this sort of music at my age, not quite "bubble-gum" sweet, but really close. I could explain very persuasively why the former of these is neither self-indulgent nor self-aggrandizing. But it would take way too long here. You can consult my previous work for all the places I explain why I sing so many covers and then listen to them repeatedly if you're that interested in finding out. Or, if you see me, ask. As to the latter, I do want to say something here I've never said before in quite this way. The very first contemporary music I listened to—via a black, fake-leather-encased transistor radio that is one of my all-time favorite possessions (I have no idea how I was able to afford it back then)—from WABC in New York was this late 50s, early 60s pop music. I was about 10 when I started, right around the time Buddy Holly, et al., died in that famously tragic plane crash in Iowa 64 years ago. I loved his music, the Big Bopper as well, ahhh, "Chantilly Lace!" Silly, you say? Not to me. I can still here his cheerful, swaggering baritone: "a wiggle in her walk, a giggle her talk, love makes the world go round." Okay, silly. Offensive even. Now, not then, which is my point.

Don MacLean, and many others, say that plane crash marked "the day the music died." I disagree. I continued to listen to this generation of American pop music for several more years, early Beach Boys, Fats Domino, Sam Cooke, Chubby Checker, Roy Orbison, the Shirelles, the Marvelettes, the Crystals, the Ronettes, the Chiffons, all those early girl bands, just so delighted to be alive in such a simple, joyous time. I honestly thought I would come of age in a world that sweet, romantic, playful, innocent.

Then it all came to an abrupt stop with the Kennedy assassination in 1963. I remember where I was sitting as I heard the news that day, in the back row of chorus class, my freshman year in high school. It felt as if I was being sucked, I mean literally, viscerally, through a funhouse mirror from my side, all that light and whimsy, to the dark side, which is where I had to stay for the remainder of the 1960s, so much death, both here, the assassinations like malignant cells metastasizing, and overseas, my generation being sent to die by the 10s of thousands in a futile, pointless war, all the violence in the streets, where I spent most of my college years. And then the wandering-lostness of drugs and religious cults of the 70s, my first decade teaching, followed by the repulsive 80s, the Reagan-Thatcher obsession with money for money's sake, damn the consequences, their catastrophic wars on labor unions and drugs at home and democracies abroad. Then the shameful compact between the American university (as a cultural institution) and the Reagan-deregulated, roid-raging financial institutions in the 90s, which saddled the next two generations of college students with life-stultifying debt, all to puff up second-rate colleges in "the national rankings." Then the second Bush blowing up the Middle East and the American economy all in one fell swoop. And, now, MAGA-mania, the politics of fear and

hatred, the demise of democracy here and abroad, authoritarianism running amok, fanned repeatedly into flame by the (allegedly) religious right, their God toting an AR-15 just in case you disagree.

Sixty years of frightful. I was there for all of that, front lines. Buddy Holly wasn't. He was still innocent and sweet, a place I could go to in my head from time to time to pretend that a happy, livable world carried on in some alternate universe, which is what I still do. I was telling a friend just a couple of days ago that there is inside me still, to this day, a very sweet, innocent boy, hoping to go out on dates, meet someone who couldn't get enough of me, hold hands, dance the night away. He had to grow up way too fast for that. I keep him alive in many ways, including listening to Buddy Holly's songs in my own voice, as if I might somehow become one with him, our lives fixed in those final moments of innocence I remember. By the time I arrived at Woodard Bay, the last refrain of "Raining in My Heart," which has a deeply personal meaning for me, was evaporating into thin air as I turned the car off, the perfect set-up for today's miraculous walk.

You might think that what I saw today—roughly the same time, same weather, same me—would be almost identical to what I saw yesterday. But it was in fact dramatically different, which is what happens with perception-of-place when you know one as intimately as I now know this one. The tide was near or at equipoise again, but the water was murkier, swirling almost imperceptibly as it waited for the moon to take it all back out. So the bayside trees were blurry, like various shades of green paint pushed around by a soft brush, colors both distinct and blending.

The sun was fully up, blindingly bright right from the get-go, enough so that I had to walk with my head down until I got under the forest canopy. They say it took about 100 million years after the Big Bang for the first stars to appear, lighting up space. When you see how light operates, blindingly when full on, so softly in the deepening woods, it seems completely obvious (to me) that the universe invented it, and then all these various ways to soften and modulate it, just so it could see itself in all of its manifestations, to satisfy that insatiable curiosity for cosmic self-discovery I wrote about in "The Curious Cosmos." It was 100 million years well-spent.

The almost infinite carpet of ferns that flourish on the forest floor all looked today like fountains spouting up and sweeping out, fixed in mid-spray, perfectly still, poised, unable to splash down, all this energy from the sun photosynthesized into these graceful plumed things, stored up over millennia, millions of flexed feathers that never relax, not at least in human time which is way too instant to witness change that happens at such a glacial pace. If they released all that energy suddenly, the whole earth would move! Yesterday, I hardly noticed the ferns, today they took my breath away. That's how different a place can be from day to day for one who loves it enough to take notice.

Right there at the forest's portal a chorus of many and various birds were singing all at once: robins, juncos, wrens, warblers, even the final few whoops of an owl before it settled down for the day. This set the theme for today's walk, full of birds. First among them, off to my left, was the pair of pileated woodpeckers, resident here, both male and female sporting the dramatic red "stocking cap" crest, the *pileus,* from which their name is derived, bobbing

back and forth with their slow-paced knocking, like a hammer tapping rhythmically on hard wood. I saw them both almost immediately, same tree, one on one side, one on the other. They are such magnificent birds, always to me a good omen for the day. A little further on I could hear the raspy grind of a kingfisher, which sounds like a car that won't start. Many of them live by these waters—I hear them all the time—but they tend to come into view only fleetingly. Then the Oregon juncos, such alert, perky birds, always in twos or threes or fours, that seem to prefer the gravel paths to pick for seeds, hopping ahead to keep their preferred 10-feet of separation from me as I walk. At one point along the way, not paying much attention, I startled a very young buck feeding along the path. It jumped out kind of sidewise in front of me, which startled me, but seemed unfazed, ambling for a bit before disappearing in the ferns. Its spike antlers, maybe two inches, were covered with the thick velvet it will be scraping trees to shed a month or so from now, its first antlered season.

Down at the point is the majestic fruit tree I've written about before, its giant umbrella of branches sweeping down to the ground all the way around, maybe fifty feet across, creating a peaceful domed space underneath, which I enter via one of the small openings on the back side, contorting my body to avoid getting poked by stiff twig-tips. I have been doing that for years now, every visit, believing this was a very large crab tree, fruitless because there is no nearby pollination source. About a month ago, though, I noticed that this year it was bearing at least a few full-size yellow apples. Yesterday I could see that there were hundreds of them, a full crop of fruit. Today, while I was standing at the base, as I usually do, one dropped through the tree to the ground. A few seconds later

another. Then another and another, as if some sort of timer had just gone off announcing "ripe" and releasing the fruit from its long season. Soon there were so many coming down I scooted out to avoid getting bonked on the head. As I walked off toward the water, I could hear the thunk-thunk-thunk of the continuing fruit-fall.

At Henderson Inlet I saw a kingfisher zig-zag across the water, stop mid-air, wings fluttering like a hummingbird, then dive straight down disappearing into the water. It came back up with a meal and flew in, settling its svelte shape on a shoreline log, that lethal beak, like a Roman *pilum*, pointing up proudly, a nice bookend to the *pileus* my walk opened with a half hour earlier. Overhead many cormorants were coming and going on their way to Budd Bay, a mile or so away, to feed. I have no idea why most of them don't feed closer to home. At the Woodard Bay outlook, the one I stood at yesterday waiting for the stand-still cormorants to wake up, they were all over the place, in the air, in the trees grunting and growling—hard to believe those guttural sounds can come from such delicate-looking birds. The half-hour difference in time, day to day, made all the difference.

So why you might ask am I documenting all of this? It's nothing but a lot of florid description. Well, to indicate the profound difference between visiting a one-off spectacle, like Mount Rainier last weekend, and visiting the same place day after day for years. I've walked at Woodard Bay many hundreds of times. Every single one of those walks has been different, each one becoming more and more special to me as it adds itself cumulatively to the deep body of experience, knowledge, and wisdom I've acquired along the way. I'm sure if I lived near Mount Rainier and visited it many hundreds of times, as the Indigenous local

tribes did, I would come to know its day-to-day nuances just as well, believing as they did that it is a sacred place. I can't do that even if I moved out there for that purpose. There is first of all that $30 dollar admission fee and then all the tourists tramping about, two among many comparably profane things that predefine this experience as a one-off destination site, a change of scenery, a photo-op, a good story to tell around the campfire. Woodard Bay is home to me. I can visit it every day if I want, see it in every one of its infinite array of visages and moods, which makes it not spectacular but miraculous. Thus that sentence I started with. That's why I was saying all of this.

5.

August 17, 2023, 3:12 AM

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

William Wordsworth

Just in again from my skygazing teatime in the front yard. There is something captivatingly surreal about the stillness of things in weather like this, pre-dawn cool after a very hot day, no wind, no movement at all. All the shrubs and flowers in the gardens in front of my house, and the house itself, stand absolutely motionless, an odd combination of energies in them, though, as if they are both completely relaxed, barely there, and wound tight as springs waiting for any movement in the air that might set them off. Like

the ferns in the forest yesterday. All that potential energy stored up, waiting to be sprung. Watching them made me hold my breath, like I was trying to simulate their tensed up static presence, or not to intrude on it with the ongoing perturbations of my breath and eyes and thoughts, all so hard to keep still.

I kept trying to reach an equilibrium of my inside with this outside, the foundation for my kingdom of heaven experience. It would come and go, flickering on and off like the dimmer stars I have to focus so hard to find. It is quite difficult to keep eyes locked in on something, specially designed as they are to notice movement, even the slightest shift in their purview, like those flashes of Perseid meteors, totally there then totally gone in an instant, an ability so essential for survival for a being who is both predator and potential prey. Watching that scene today was like reading a book that showed only its first word. Your eyes understand from experience that there are likely many more to follow, but they can't see them until they show themselves, go into forward motion, have to wait abated no matter how long it takes. Today my body waited abated at the gateway to my kingdom of heaven, in and out, out and in, literally breath-taking.

Something similar happened when I turned to the sky. There is a bright star that centers the scene I look at from my vantage point at that time of day, the one I mentioned yesterday, off to the west, about 30 degrees up into the sky. Today it was back where I expected it to be. If I stare into that area for a few seconds, another dimmer star appears to its right. If I continue staring for a minute or so, a third star, very dim, appears to its left, flickering in and out of sight. It is not Orion's belt. I've seen that from my yard on other occasions, before I go to bed. It is quite

obvious. This one is not. That third star seems to strobe dimly in a sort of rhythm, like my eyes are breathing it in and out, making me feel just like the landscape, both completely relaxed and wound tight.

This may all sound like pointless navel-gazing, and maybe it is. But it did allow me to think a bit about some ongoing changes in my diminishing social universe, that interval between reaching out and someone reaching back, which may or may not ever happen, or will take such a long time that it will no longer matter. Almost all of my remote relationships, which flourished in the "cloud" during the COVID lockdowns, have now faded, understandably. People need to live with what and who is right in front of them, like I do. The few I am still in touch with tend to respond at a glacial pace. Cross-country communication, which can these days be instant, was speedier during the 19th century when mail was carried by wagon trains! During these interims, my mind keeps moving at my pace, changes are effected, decisions made, all at light-speed by comparison. Possible portals opened by a missive's gesture gradually close over time, the absence of foot-wear allowing the surrounding vegetation to recolonize those pathways, which disappear completely when the interval is long enough. Soon there is "no way back."

I just remembered a poem I wrote last year that may be pertinent to this:

5 o'clock (1/12/22)

between the hemlocks
and the house
across the street

a v-shaped
patch of sky
just barely baby blue
behind the lightest
wash of wispy whites

5 minutes later
it is all gone gray

there is a window
of opportunity
for everything
today I happened
to look out mine
at exactly
the right time
and I noticed

one of those two
is never quite enough

Yes, there is a window of opportunity for everything. I need to remember that in my interactions with others. Timely noticing. The Greeks called this intuitive sense *kairos*, the right gesture at the right moment, the spring sprung precisely, a good lesson to learn from sitting in my front yard this morning, myself and the world in front of me doing all of this work without appearing to move a muscle.

. . .

I'm just back from my second walk of the day, at Watershed Park this time. Everything in the park was standing just as stock still this afternoon as my yard was

this morning. Kind of eerie, really. The only thing moving was "magical" Moxlie Creek which burbles along at the same depth and pace no matter how long we go without rain here—two months now—which is probably why they call it magical. Whatever underground springs feed it must never give a thought to what happens above, rain or shine, all the same, their waters just keep gurgling up. I admire that nonchalance, persistence, stability. I just posted an entry on my Instagram page, a quote from Lao Tzu: "Care about what other people think and you will always be their prisoner." The deep-down waters that feed Moxlie Creek knew that way before he did.

Even the birds were silent, hiding somewhere out of sight. You might say that I was moving, too, but at one point along the way I had the strangest sensation that it was the earth itself moving under my feet, rotating on its way through space, and my feet were just keeping up with it like they might a treadmill. Going nowhere fast. Like Moxlie creek in a way. Stand still at the first overlook and watch it wend its way over and through the little dam of logs and leaves: It moves so forcefully, gracefully, yet still stands still, a sheer glistening.

. . .

They call these the dog days of summer. I always wondered why, so I just Googled it. I learned that it has nothing whatever to do with actual dogs, but with Sirius, the Greater Dog Star, which rises and sets with the sun from early July through mid-August. The Greeks and Romans thought it added to the sun's heat, making those days even more unbearable. Thus the name, originally dog-star days. I learned how to orient toward that star via Orion's belt, which I will do some night if I can ever stay

up late enough to see it. Or when it starts to get dark earlier. By the time I get settled out there these days, almost 4 AM, I can't see Orion. So I'm sure I can't see Sirius, rising in the east, pre-dawn, while I'm looking west.

. . .

I just reread this essay, and it seems to have lost its way. Or I have. All that stuff about spectacles and changing scenery seems like another lifetime to me. Mumbo jumbo. Much ado about nothing. Who cares? The sentence I was just about to write said that lostness of this sort is one of the risks of spending as much time in solitude as I do. The path slowly narrows until it withers away, blending back into the forest floor. The one I want to write instead replaces risks with rewards. Lostness is such a blessing to me, more and more so the older I get. I'm just going to amble off into the endless thickets of ferns ahead, see where it takes me, until I disappear, like that buck I saw yesterday.

If there is an ideal time of year to lose your way, this is it, especially in the Pacific Northwest, where the weather is eternally perfect, beautiful blue skies all day long, crystal clear skies all night long, the dry heat so soothing, the cool nights refreshing, time itself drifting to a soft stop, eyes, breath, body cossetted in comfort, stilled and waiting, for what? My lost-in-the-cloud missives are like the flat stones I sometimes skip at Woodard Bay, skittering to a stop, wafting softly down into the deep. Kind of like this essay, kind of like me, skittering to a stop, wafting softly down into the deep. Lost. At last. In a good way.

As I say in the final poem in *Harvest Moon*, reporting on a walk in Boyce Park in Pittsburgh that felt just like today's, six years ago, same time of year, same kind of day:

Then I got there, and
the sunroots I walk through
right when I start are all
just slumped over now,
like their air was out, too,
a few flecks of yellow
still stuck up on the stems,
but summer on the run,
and that was the last thing
I can remember seeing
on that walk because
it was just me seeing,
not me seeing so I could
pretend to see you
seeing me seeing.
And now, right now,
I'm calling this one done,
and now, right now,
I'm calling lots of things done.
You might be one of them.
All I know is I'm not.
And this is not

THE END

because, like I said: Now
I'm on this side of that.
And when I say now,

I mean NOW.

I'm tired again of pretending that someone is seeing me seeing. It may be charmingly naïve, but it is inane, a culturally induced delusion. Now, once more, I'm on this side of that. For good, I hope. It's not that you won't find me if you decide to look. It's just that you won't find the me you remember. So many things of magnitude have intervened, spectacles, miracles, meanderings, skitterings, all that change, like Moxlie Creek, never the same river twice, the one you thought you knew, the one you remember, halfway to the sea now.

There is nothing "magical" about this. The same is true of you and everyone else who disappears from view for a while. Being alive changes everything. You are as new as I am, like that third star I see every morning. I looked away; I will have to start all over to find you again, let my eyes accumulate photons, assuming you send some my way. When you reappear to me, I will reappear to you. If you want me to. Or not. No worries. As Walt Whitman says:

> *I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,*
> *I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.*
>
> *I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,*
> *If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.*
>
> *You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,*
> *But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,*
> *And filter and fibre your blood.*
>
> *Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,*
> *Missing me one place search another,*
> *I stop somewhere waiting for you.*

6.

August 20, 4:14 AM

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur. . .

. . . These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration . . .

I'm just in from another stint in the yard, very brief because the sky was milky white with the sheer curtain of smoke flowing in here now from eastern Washington, site of the closest of what have been this summer's many monumental fires. Canada seems to be this year's California, millions of acres of boreal forest incinerated, generating enough smoke to choke the eastern and midwestern United States for weeks. Whole towns are burning up there right now, and even more disastrously last week in Hawaii. The veil of haze that clouded out all the stars this morning is trivial by comparison, which in itself says something about the climate-change catastrophes ongoing worldwide. This essay, which drifted

off way back when, has suddenly been stunned to attention, the seemingly innocuous and optional matter of how we choose to view nature taking on considerably more urgency than it had last week.

You may have the impression from my epigraphs that I am a big fan of Wordsworth. Not so. I do like *Lyrical Ballads*, that first book he co-authored with Coleridge. His poems in particular have been heavily critiqued as sentimental, even maudlin, and they are, but I am highly tolerant of, even enjoy that effect. The original preface is a treat, a page or so long, both provocative and disarmingly defensive. But once Wordsworth became famous, within a couple of years, he became almost intolerably bombastic. The preface to the second edition of the book was suddenly 20 times longer. I find about 20% of it usefully readable, even stunning, the parts of it I quote, for example. The rest is just flash and Romantic boilerplate. Blah, blah, blah.

I like many of his early lyric poems as well (the *Lyrical Ballad* poems were mostly narrative), some of which I quote here. Wordsworth's later poems, *The Prelude* in particular, that long, autobiographical epic he began shortly after *Lyrical Ballads* came out and didn't publish until 50 years later, is particularly windy, turgid, boring, an attempt to create a larger than life POET, a spectacle, from the little poet who started out so humbly and deferentially. When Wordsworth is good, he is very good indeed, no question. And some of his sentiments about what poetry is and is for as a human enterprise have opened "windows of opportunity" for me in this piece, using his words to prompt mine, which are different from his. But I'm not a big fan.

One of the main reasons for that is his stereotypically Western approach to viewing "Nature," capital N, aggrandizing it as he does himself, haunted nostalgically more by what is gone than what is there. No matter how subtle or intense Wordsworth's emotions are when he reports on this Nature, he is always apart from what he sees. The Romantic method he developed, all that work to turn the originary "emotion" into a more remote poetic one, via contemplation, is perfectly designed to create spatial and temporal distances, big ones, between one's immediate experience and what one has to say about it. *Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, for example, quite a beautiful and moving poem, was, as my epigraph makes clear, written five years after the witnessing event that inspired it, which is the time it took for Wordsworth to transform a momentary experience into a monumental one, a miracle into a spectacle. It's being composed retrospectively, from a hazy netherworld of "nameless, unremembered acts" and "half-extinguished thought," as he eulogizes a time when, as a very young child, he could see clearly, here and now, with no "interest/ Unborrowed from the eye." "That time is past," he says "And all its aching joys are now no more." It is a poem based on longing for what's lost, not on seeing what's there, which is one of his primary contributions to the Romantic mindset that animates, to this day, the way we "see" Nature, or its stand-in "the environment." Or, really, don't.

Western culture, informed as it is by two of the most intensely patriarchal ideologies humankind has invented—Greco-Roman philosophy, that font of "civilization's" god(s)-sanctioned privilege, the foundation and justification for imperialist assaults on Indigenous or "other" cultures and on nature itself; and the Judeo-Christian religion, which installs "man," created in the

image of God (and I gender that noun intentionally), as kingpin of the universe, all the rest of nature, including "woman," here to serve "his" needs—assumes that "nature" is one thing, material, subordinate, and "man" is another, inspirited, dominant. From this foundational binary—nature/man—all of the other deleterious ones you can think of devolve, including rampant (neo-liberal) capitalism, its inevitable partner in the murderous crimes "he" so blithely perpetrates to serve "his" egocentric (no hyphen) agenda.

This way of asserting human privilege may seem natural to us, but only because we have been so fully indoctrinated into it that no alternative is imaginable. We hear a lot about the ongoing 6th extinction being caused now by the excesses this perspective warrants. But if you look at the history of Western civilization, all the wars, genocides, enslavements, on the human side, all the willful exterminations of the flora and fauna on the natural side, all the desecrations of earth to provide toxic raw materials and fossil fuels to feed our various addictions, that extinction event has been ongoing for at least two millennia already. No wonder nothing much is left to destroy. Except ourselves of course.

Painters inspired by the Wordsworthian way of conceptualizing Nature, like Turner, say—all those haunting natural scenes rendered in his distinctively blurry pre-Impressionist style—or Constable—all those precisely rendered landscapes with people rustic and small and landscapes lavish, often tumultuously cloudy—operate in the same paradigm. We are against nature, not with it; outside it, not within it. Albert Bierstadt amps this up a few notches on the American side—all those epicized mountains and waterfalls, the perspective always receding

deeper and deeper into the distance, the past. If there are people at all, they are tiny. The artist on the other hand is ultra-large, sees everything from outside the frame, often slightly elevated, a spectator viewing spectacles, flitting from one to the next like a hungry hummingbird—Bierstadt galivanted thither and yon to find his next fix, addictively.

For them and the other Romantics, and so often still for us, nature is always out there—Nature—a thing apart, a spectacle grand enough to relieve our torpor temporarily. Or a reservoir of resources we can consume until it is empty. Or, as it becomes more inimical to us, a sort of hothouse we need to tinker with so we can continue to breathe and drink water. Or just an assortment of prefabbed natural "wonders" sequestered now in "parks," where we can visit one or another every five years or so, not to change our minds but to change the scenery, to consume it again and again, just as nostalgically as Wordsworth does Tintern Abbey, afflicted by our own "unremembered pleasures."

So now that this essay is awake again, it is telling me to argue fiercely that one way forward for humankind—if there is any way at all to avoid our own demise—is to change how we look at the world. Now. For real. It is not scattered around us, an array of disconnected spectacles; or outside us, a bounty of resources to consume visually or materially. It is part of us, we are part of it, in it, with it. Instead of driving hundreds of miles, or flying thousands of miles, for a "change of scenery" that will relieve you momentarily from the "torpor" induced these days not just by a national culture falling apart, but by the earth burning down and washing away, go out into your front yard, or somewhere nearby where you can walk for a

while, cherish what is at hand; lose yourself—your "self," that cultural fiction invented to launch humankind "out of this world"—until you become a part of what's there and what's there becomes a part of you, no inside-outside, no top-bottom, no spirit-matter, no binaries at all, no boundaries at all, the kingdom of heaven embodied right here and now.

The difference between ego-centrism and eco-centrism is not, this essay is now telling me, simply a matter of personal preference, as my initial description may seem to imply. They are radically different paradigms for inhabiting the world. The latter is way less destructive than the former, not just now, but always. It is surely impossible for us to fully recover a relationship with the world we live in like the one Indigenous peoples perfected, practiced and enjoyed for millennia. Civilization is like COVID, just there now, endemic. Unless of course we destroy it and have to start over as hunter-gatherers, which is not an unlikely outcome at this point. I've spent my entire life under the cloud of potential worldwide annihilation, nuclear first of all, suddenly and completely, bang; now unabated climate change and the wanton destruction of animals and their habitats, globally, on an industrial scale, a slo-mo version of the same thing, whimper.

Competing paradigms, as Thomas Kuhn pointed out over 60 years ago, are by definition incommensurable. You need to pick one, the one that makes the most sense at the moment given the knowledge available. Changing one's paradigmatic view of anything can be scary, like leaping into a liminal space before you see the landing spot. But it is also exciting. I mean really exciting. Change is good. Paradigmatic change is fantastic. And it takes no time at

all, more like waking up than getting a graduate degree, a change of heart that changes everything. A good first step is to revise your acts of seeing. If you want to change what you do with and for earth, change the way you look at it. And do it right now. Time is not a luxury we have any longer, all this fiddling while "home" burns.

As to spectacles and changes of scenery: When I want to see Mount Rainier I'll pay special attention on a clear day as I drive down Harrison Avenue on the Westside of Olympia, or up State Street on the Eastside, where for a few seconds it will suddenly appear, stunningly, awesomely, 60 miles off and right on top of me, taking my breath away, new every time. You can do the same thing with whatever miracles are in your neighborhood. Keep an eye out for them, visit them over and over until you know them intimately, love them, not as resources but as a part of yourself, the same way they love you. What hope we have left to save our beautiful green oasis on this tiny blue dot careening through a universe of light will be uplifted a bit if you do.

All the Time in the World

a talk delivered in March 2016
at the annual Composition Program Awards Event
at the University of Pittsburgh

This is an older piece to be sure, but my all-time favorite talk, the last one I gave before retirement, fully in keeping with the overriding vision of this book—waking up—and the ambition of my work generally. If this is the last thing I ever get to say to you, I'm more than happy with that.

. . .

I want to talk to you today, all of you young people especially, finishing up degrees, at the onset of new careers, such an exciting moment, I want to talk to you today, about time, what you will be doing with it, what you will make of it, the next 20 minutes, the next 20 years, no matter, it's all the same. I've been mesmerized by the mysterious experience of time in my own life, in life itself, since I was a kid. I don't know why, or at least don't remember how I got started thinking about this almost infinitely malleable matrix that formats the paths we have to navigate a way along while we're here. But I've returned to that conundrum quite regularly over the years, to read about it, write about it, again and again. I'll be talking briefly about some of my work along these lines, but I chose this theme today for a much more practical reason.

As you may have noticed, in our culture, the academic culture, everyone always seems short on time, acts and feels as if there is just never enough of it, any of it all sometimes, hectic, harried, stressed. We rush by each other with perfunctory salutations, or none at all, leaning forward, almost jogging, books clutched to our sides, we complain about how can I possibly do all of this and this, you can't be serious about adding that to my this, and, sit with you for a cup of coffee, well, maybe next month, oh, wait, I forgot, I'm busy then, how about next term, or next year, I am so busy, busy, busy. Even answering an email sometimes seems more than many people can spare the time for, or, if they do, the recipient may wish they hadn't. For example, on the very day I got the request from Annette to give this talk, I got an email, out of the blue, the kind we often get. It was in my queue just above Annette's, so I read it in its sequence, as I generally do. This young person was asking for some advice and help in the application process for our Hot Metal Bridge program. I responded normally, appropriately, took maybe 5 minutes, tops. I got a long reply, which opened this way:

> *Dear Paul,*
> *Thank you for your prompt response and for offering your time as a resource. I'm also grateful for the sensitivity and kindness with which you communicate in the previous email; post-bacc and grad apps have been stressful and I'm constantly finding myself frustrated at condescending and/or robotic responses from a variety of well-established academics [a long elision here where they told me about their work, life, etc. . .] Thank you again for offering your services and for being so down-to-earth!*

How to feel about this? Yes, I'm so great, I took 5 minutes of my precious time to offer a bit of help? No, I felt shame, on behalf of a profession, my profession, that has gone so awry. Why? Because at least some people actually took the time to respond, the overtone of their message being: I will use this time grudgingly to make it clear to you that I am too busy to spend any of it with you.

You may hear your mentors talking that way, other faculty you encounter, here, elsewhere, colleagues at conferences, your own peers even, and you think, I guess I must be too busy, too, yes, yes, yes, I am, of course I am, just like them, no, no, no I can't talk now, maybe, well, someday, not now, can't you see how I'm rushing to get, Ok, where was I heading, I don't remember, you distracted me . . .

I'm going to open with my conclusion, as baldly stated as possible, the one I hope to get to through what I say today, just so you know exactly where I'm headed with all of this: That way of talking, that way of acting is, I believe in every fiber of my being, so stupid, a self-induced delusion rooted in hubris that syphons off any joy we might rightfully take from our work before we even get to feel it, and it is absolutely not true. Me, you, anyone, everyone in this business, we have all the time in the world, or should, because, in the general scheme of human labor, I'd be hard pressed to name another profession, now or ever, in which its practitioners have more direct control over their time than ours. That kind of control is an extraordinary luxury in relation to work-for-pay both in historical terms and in our current culture. Yes, we have a lot to do: reading, thinking, writing, talking, the very things that our love of which

drew us here to do, the things we would be trying mightily to find time for if we were compelled to make our living in another line of work. So why not enjoy them. OK, that's my conclusion. And, if you're still with me, the tonal low point of this talk, I promise. Now I can take the rest of my time up here having some fun.

And what better way to do that, for me, than to talk about Coleridge, who is, as those of you who know me know, really, not just one of my favorite authors but one of my all-time favorite people. I wish I could have known him, hung around with him, I bet he was a blast. I'm going to focus on one of my favorite Coleridgean enterprises, those multiple "Essays on the Principles of Method," scattered through the little journal he founded and published in 1809 and 1810 called *The Friend*. What a sweet title!

You might be thinking right now, Coleridge, Samuel Taylor Coleridge? He's not such not a great vehicle to try to ride to your conclusion on the wise use of time. He hardly ever finished anything, all that laudanum-induced laxity and frantic, failed thinking, which is what everyone keeps saying about him. I saw an example of exactly that attitude toward him while I was preparing for this talk. So this guy is describing how Coleridge handled *The Friend* and says, kind of dismissively, that, well, like so much else in his work, he just couldn't keep up with the production schedule; that in the two years he published *The Friend*, it came out only "intermittently," 28 issues in all. But think about this: Coleridge didn't just edit and publish and distribute the journal, he produced its content! So, let's say you decide to start a journal, get it out there, and, of course, write the articles in it. And you can only do that 28 times in two years. I'm sure everyone

here, and the man writing that sentence, could do way better than that.

Actually, I never heard of the man who was writing that sentence, but I can say with what I believe is some confidence, that with this one little "incomplete" on Coleridge's transcript, one of many, many others, he achieved more than that writer has or will in his entire lifetime. So what else didn't he finish: "Kubla Khan," what a slacker, "Christabel", slouch, the *Biographia*'s second volume, loser. And here's the thing, when Coleridge describes himself in one of his letters he says "I am indolence, capable of energies." In other words, Coleridge did all of this stuff, tons more than I ever was able to do, and he had all the time in the world, enough to feel he was actually lazy. That's my kind of guy: "Hey, Sam, got time for a cup of coffee some day?" "Sure, Paul. Let's go right now." And it wouldn't be some 10-minute stand-up, chug it, and run job. No, two hours, a *tour de force*, a ramble around Xanadu, an afternoon to remember. That's the guy I want to work with. He has all the time in the world. And so do I.

I encountered these essays on method for the first time when I was an undergraduate, in a book I bought called *The Portable Coleridge*, a pretty good group of excerpts from the series, enough to get the drift of his overall argument. I was a physics major at the time, reading a lot about method, Bacon, Descartes, Sartre, anyone I could find who wrote about it specifically. I thought that among them—no weaklings there, to be sure—Coleridge was the staunchest, the most interesting. About 15 years later, in the early 1980s, I came back to those pieces for another look and ended up writing a long essay of my own, an essay on time, on the way rhetorical structures

pre-orchestrated temporality, inverting its stereotypically forward-oriented vector, when we spoke, wrote, the very future we forethought, but hadn't yet materialized in any words, all of its multiple possibilities, like an array of alternate universes waiting to see which will be enacted, flashing back toward us, as we took our time down one of the possible paths we had opened. I had such a good time writing that essay. One of my all-time personal favorites. By which I mean, I couldn't get it published anywhere back then. Too long, too strange, too something. So I put it away, in my private stash. About 20 years later, Byron Hawk asked me if I had any essays he hadn't seen, so I sent it to him. About five years later, via a related set of connections, that he initiated, it ended up online in *Enculturation*, 25 years after I wrote it. I love that essay for many reasons, above all its patience. It had all the time in the world to wait for the world to have time for it. And I love Coleridge's essays for helping me to think about time in this way, not as inimical, a never-enoughness, always flogging us forward, but as a friend, wending gently back to walk with us toward whatever it is we came here to do.

They are pertinent to my theme today, these essays, because Coleridge says this straight out at the conclusion of the final essay:

> *From the indemonstrable flows the sap, that circulates through every branch and spray of demonstration. To this principle we referred the choice of the final object, the control over time.*

I remember getting to that sentence and thinking "what the hell are you talking about?" You mention time offhandedly here and there, sure, I noticed that, but the whole series, the final object, about time, control over

time? No way. So I went back and re-read the essays through this lens and, voila, yes, Coleridge was right and I was wrong (big surprise): That was the theme, but it was entirely subterranean, everywhere in it, down below, though, like Alph the sacred river running through Kubla Kahn's measureless caverns down to a sunless sea. The cool thing is, you would never know that if you just read them through once. But you can't miss it if you read them twice. And that is precisely the nature of the sort of circuit that Coleridge believed got opened up when a thoughtful speaker uttered the first word. The end was forecast in a way, but even the speaker couldn't know it yet. And then, there it is, revealing itself just as the circuit closes, and the whole thing preceding it gets recomputed under its aegis.

I know I'm nearing the end of my allotted time here today, so I'm going to tease out only one of Coleridge's sentences—after such a long build-up, just one sentence, maybe a letdown to you. But it is such a great sentence. And, atypically for Coleridge, it's a very short one. I recall vividly my first reading of it. It's maybe halfway through the series, and he starts: "In wonder (Greek word), says Aristotle, does philosophy begin; " So I get that far in the sentence and being an eager and speculative reader, and seizing on the freedom Coleridge promotes by construing the character of his rhetorical space as "forethoughtful," I'm zipping ahead, imagining how it will go, where he will say philosophy ends, and in my head I hear: "in wisdom, no, no, in knowledge, no, no, in serenity, no, no, in truth," all the bromides I could generate, I suppose. But that's not how it ends. It ends this way: "and in astoundment (Greek word), says Plato, does all true philosophy finish." So, in wonder does philosophy begin and in astoundment does it finish.

What a downer, I thought. I know that astoundment is not identical with wonder, but maybe it's wonder times two, wonder with a couple of smiley-face emojis after it, and I'm going through the whole of philosophy to get there. Huh? Almost immediately, though, I began to recalculate, to see what he meant. In that very sentence, for example, I, me reading it, started with wonder and ended in astoundment. And that shift opened a circuit for me to think in a new way about "philosophy," the subject of his sentence. For example: Let's say I read Parmenides, which, if you have read *Rereading Poets* you know I did in college for the first time, with very minimal wonderment. Then, let's say, I read Heraclitus, a little before him; Plato, a little after, then Descartes, Kant, whatever. Then I read Parmenides again. Whoa! I didn't notice that the first time around, which is actually what happened with me. That's already wonder times way more than two.

Then, say, I read Heidegger and Derrida and come back again. Wow, I see it, astounding, but it's only ground floor astounding. So, say, I read Graham Harman and Timothy Morton and come back again. Now that is astoundment, full blown. Parmenides, those horses taking the young man to the "ends of his mind" out there into the ether where he meets the goddess who tells him the cryptic secrets of Being, capital B. Yes, that's astoundment. Maybe it took me 50 years to take the whole path, my path, not Coleridge's, just mine, to migrate across the universe from wonderment to astoundment, which is not wonder times two but wonder times a million. And that's just with philosophy, as I said, the grammatical subject of his sentence. What I love most about that sentence is you can substitute almost anything you want in that subject position, and it's all still true:

Everything of value in life begins in wonder, finishes in astoundment.

All the great paths I have traversed, simultaneously, over those same 50 years, because that's how parallel universes operate in the temporal spaces we inhabit here, they have been just like that, opening a way, calling me in, not to hurry, not to get there, but to be here, to do this, to live now. Everything I cherished, I have encountered on those paths, my multifaceted way, through this beautiful, beautiful world, the sentences, the poems, the classes, the courses, everything I took my time to read, write, my family, my morning walks, even you, if you have taken the time to be with me, has made itself present, manifestly, first through my wonderment, and, then after a second, a day, a year, a decade, or, now, these 3 score+ years into my life, it has rendered me astounded. Some of those circuits in my life are now closed, and I am on the verge of closing others. I am so happy, relieved, grateful that I had all the time in the world for them.

You have all the time in the world, too, believe me, that is true. Care for yourself and for those around you. Be kindly whenever and as much you can, and when you can't, be polite. Listen whenever and as much as you can, and when the need to speak arises, as it will, speak up with passion and care on behalf of what matters most to you. The work will get done much more quickly, more quietly, so much less drama, if you do, I guarantee it. And you will be much the happier in the doing, your time here so much sweeter, and the time others spend in your company sweeter as well.

Our field is ensconced pretty much at the center of that academic galaxy we call "the humanities." We are closing out its dedicated year here almost as I speak. We all, every one of us, every day, need to remember that at the root of that word is a human, and it's not just some inscrutable concept; it's a me and a you and that passerby over there, struggling maybe, glancing our way, hoping we might walk over, that guy behind the email, trying, those dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of good young people who pay to spend their time with us, whose lives we are changing, even if only slightly, every day, for better or for worse. Humans. So be one. Be as great as you want to be along the way. Yes, be as great as you want to be along the way. But if you don't take the time, all the time in the world, which I am telling you is what you have, to also be good, to do some good with and for those fellow travelers who cross your path here, which is what we humans are made for and called toward, don't ever say you learned anything of consequence from me.

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