# Substacking
# in the Spirit

**(what I did on my summer vacation)**

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**Cover image by Joseph Kameen:**
**"Fool Fight," from his "Water to the Ocean, Sand to the Beach" series, 2016-17**

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## Preface

This book is a compilation of the 21 Substack posts I composed during the summer of 2025 (and the one straggler that floated in like a bedraggled leaf mid-October.) The title is a play on "backpacking," the classic "what I did on my summer vacation" mode of adventure. Mine happened entirely here in Olympia and was recorded at my desk overlooking the back yard of my house on Bigelow Avenue. It started at the tail end of lilac season, an especially fulsome one this year, and ended just as the last of the thousands of pink roses on the two-story climber that has colonized a holly tree withered away. But the primary scene of those adventures was inward, more precisely "in the spirit" (the name of my page), my own and the those of all the amazing poets, gurus, philosophers, and physicists I channeled along the way. It was a wild ride.

I started my page on a whim, no plan, no agenda, just figured I'd write and post something or other on my mind every now and then. Once I started though, it turned very quickly into the sort of binge-writing cycle that always culminates in a book for me, three months, writing every morning before the sun comes up, almost involuntarily, as if my fingertips are doing my "thinking." I never know quite where it's all going, how what I'm typing will relate to what came before it or what it might lead to. I simply trust the process now. It is, in the end, both an exhausting and joyous experience, if such a combo makes sense.

When it's all done, it simply stops, as it did last week. Then I look back on what I've made with all those words that showed up on these pages day after day. I am always pleased, especially so in this case because it happened so stealthily. One day I saw a seagull slicing across a blue sky over Budd Bay, which reminded me of a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and I decided to write about that. Soon I was posting twice a week, mostly about the

three “fields” that I’ve spent so much time lately working intensively: poetry, ancient wisdom texts, and quantum mechanics, which I discovered, and then pointed out repeatedly here, all share the same spirit. And, of course, some politics from time to time, which is inescapable these days for obvious reasons.

The cover image, one of my son’s paintings, is a perfect depiction of how my process of composition works. There is an ongoing brawl among images and ideas in my head, invisible to everyone, sometimes even to me. There is an interim stage akin to dreaming that somehow sorts it all out. Sometimes it is actual dreaming, which is why I tend to write just after I wake up. My fingertips then create the entree, which in this case I served via Substack.

The format is self-explanatory: Each post is dated and titled, beginning to end. You can read one or some, pretty much in any order you prefer, my favorite motif for organizing the sort of extended thinking I do, more like vignettes or episodes than a story. I had to eliminate the images I used to top each of the essays, of course, and the various mp3s of my readings of poems, which required minor revisions to the original posts. I hope you either have already (if you visited my page) or will find here something you enjoy.

**May 27: In the Spirit …**

I am a poet and essayist with a passion for all things that uplift and sustain "spirit," mine in particular, especially these days, which so often leave it in need of remediation. As you'll find out in the coming weeks, if you like what you find here, I define that term expansively to include ancient wisdom traditions, Eastern and Western religions, poetic visionary practices, anything esoteric, mystical, or arcane, up to and including quantum mechanics. I'll write about all of that along the way as the spirit moves me. I am not an established scholar in any of these areas. After 40 years as an English professor, I have very little interest in, and don't have time enough left to nurture, that kind of expertise outside of "my field." Now, if knowing something doesn't help me do something with it, something that changes me right now, I lose interest in it very quickly. I read, watch and listen agnostically, not as an unbeliever or a skeptic (I am neither), but in the sense of not having any preordained preference for one brand or -ism over another. I explain it this way in my most recent book, *Willing Spirit*, pertinent to ongoing debates about "reality" in quantum mechanics:

> *Those are big questions, the kind that meander sooner or later past the boundary between what is known with confidence and what is speculative, the province of philosophy; what is presumed to be knowable and what is not, the province of spirituality. . . .*
>
> *I have written copiously about those kinds of complementary inter-disciplinary mergers in many places over the years, way too much to even index let alone summarize here. What I want to add here is pretty simple and straightforward: Every discipline has at least some practitioners who seek to move beyond received*

*orthodoxy and toward some experience of the unfathomable "mystery" their preferred system implies or points toward. They want not just knowledge but enlightenment. We call them variously mystics, gurus, sages; and we call what they seek variously the ineffable, the transcendental, the sublime, all of which can be approached via conventional means, like language and mathematics, along an asymptotic trajectory. But to reach the source, the origin, one must exit symbolic systems and enter a state of direct perception or unmediated experience, those places where words and numbers fall silent.*

*Every spiritual system I'm aware of, and that's a lot of them, has a preferred pathway toward that sort of ecstatic knowledge. I believe they all, ultimately, seek the same thing: an experience that surpasses understanding. Some call what they seek God. Some call it Nature or Self or the Universe. Some prefer not even to name the source, out of respect for its infinitude. . .*

*I make no judgments about the relative merits of any of them. In my view, they all share the same aspiration: to know what is apparently unknowable. That is my aspiration as well, so I spend a lot of time immersed in these systems.* (76-77)

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I'll draw my first post from my wheelhouse, a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins called "The Windhover," one I read for the first time in high school about 60 years ago and revisit from time to time. As it happens, just yesterday, watching a seagull kite on the wind above Budd Bay in downtown Olympia, the poem flashed up in my mind, so I read it again. Here it is:

*I caught this morning morning's minion, king-*
*dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,*
*in his riding*
*Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding*
*High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing*
*In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,*
*As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl*
*and gliding*
*Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding*
*Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of; the mastery of the thing!*

*Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here*
*Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion*
*Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!*

*No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion*
*Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,*
*Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion.*

Hopkins, as you can see, is a master of verbal pyrotechnics, explosions of light and heat splashing across his "sky" like that falcon, the object/subject of this poem, whose hovering and then sudden swings he strives to emulate stylistically via dynamic, cascading sounds corralled by what he called "sprung rhythm."

Hopkins was a Jesuit priest, a Catholic by conversion in a family and national culture not particularly amicable toward his vision. Early on he experimented with some dire ascetic practices, in one case refusing to drink liquid for a week until his tongue turned black and he passed out. So, yes, he was pretty intense! He felt that poetry, an inclination he inherited from his father, was averse to his religious calling, so he resisted it with all his might, once gave up poetry for Lent! After his ordination he burned all his poems. As I said, pretty intense. In his late 20s he had his second conversion, one that resurrected poetry as something potentially sacred rather than profane. Much of the poetry he wrote thereafter

has a dark, brooding aspect, as, by all accounts, he did. This poem is anything but, not self-abnegation but the revelation of godly spirit transfigured into language via an intense sensory encounter with that magnificent bird. Hopkins called these transcendent engagements with natural essences (he had a lot of them, often with birds) "inscape," which arise from heightened perceptions he called "instress." I like all of that, the poems, his method, his discourse, having been raised in an Irish Catholic culture that presumed (or at least I thought it did) godliness was transfused into everything, a perfect nursery for a poetic sensibility, quite unlike the hothouse St. Augustine erected around the newly Roman (i.e., Imperial) Catholic (i.e, universal) Church in the 4th century to protect it from, among other earthly things, a popular theologian called Pelagius (who proffered a Celtic version of Christianity much more companionable to poets like Hopkins and me). Augustine differentiates between the untainted City of God and the corrupt City of Man this way in his book *The City of God*: "Two loves have made the two cities. Love of self, even to the point of contempt for God, made the earthly city; and love of God, even to the point of contempt for self, made the heavenly city." Yikes! Which of these two "churches" you got when I was kid depended more on the luck of the priestly draw than any rational pattern. I hit the jackpot early on with Father Craig, a wise, wry Irish dandy decked out always in a flat brimmed straw hat. Wonderful man.

I can see now why Augustine prosecuted his war on Pelagius full bore: Celtic or Roman, take your pick; in his historical moment you can't have both. He won that war, of course, as Julius Ceasor won his a few centuries earlier in Gaul, which is usually the case with "the powers that be," what I call elsewhere the old "if you can't join 'em, beat 'em, to death if necessary!" I bring this up here mostly because Hopkins was influenced by the Welsh language, which he acquired in his early studies, and by Welsh literature, which favored repetitions of sound to achieve mesmeric effects. When Pelagianism was stamped out as heresy in Rome, it

survived, given its Celtic roots, only in the contemporaneous boondocks of Ireland and Wales. While Pelagius' personal fate after his excommunication and exile is uncertain, one legend has him "retiring" to Wales and publishing anti-Augustinian screeds and signing them with Augustine's name! Exactly the sort of darkly fierce resistance to oppression Celt-friendly poets welcome. I have no idea if Hopkins knew anything about Pelagius, whose writing was pretty severely repressed, burning and burying, that sort of thing. But I think he would have been a happier chap if he had found such a fulsome alternative to the Augustinian (and Jesuitical) severity toward which his temperament was unfortunately inclined.

I back/slashed object and subject above to describe what Hopkins makes of and does with the windhover in this poem. I am a great lover of all spiritual systems that elide, override or problematize the relationship between those two modes of being, which in most stereotypical Westerns ideologies (cue up Augustinian Catholicism) are polarized, such that ne'er the twain shall meet. You can decide for yourself whether Hopkins' falcon draws them together as one here, the poet's spirit, mine, maybe yours, hovering, tension strung tight and then unsprung "in his ecstasy."

. . .

Hopkins wrote "The Windhover" in 1877. As was the case with most of his work it wasn't published until 1914, well after his death in 1889 at the age of 45.

**May 30: In the Spirit … of full disclosure**

*Without [action], thought can never ripen into truth. Whilst the world hangs before the eye as a cloud of beauty, we cannot even see its beauty. Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind. The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

When I taught entry level courses, my favorite venues during my working years, I liked to open with a text that emphasized personal agency rather that deference to authority as the key element in worthy scholarship. Obviously, one cannot pursue scholarly enterprise absent recourse to authorities. But recourse and deference are two different things. My sense was that most entry level students tended to believe they were at university to learn what betters-than-they knew, which is legitimate. I simply wanted to emphasize that, in the end, what they themselves came to know, by their own lights, installing it in their own being and bones, is what would make them good at what they were preparing for, worthy of trust, a genuine scholar. That was my opening pitch. I often started those courses with one of Plato's dialogues, ideally suited to get at this general point, Socrates the inveterate contrarian poking and prodding one or another of "the authorities" in his local arena. Sometimes I used Virgina Woolf for this. Sometimes James Baldwin. Maybe my favorite text, though, for making this move was Emerson's "The American Scholar," the source of my epigraph. The day before the class started to read the text, I'd spend some time setting the scene of

his presentation, the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard College, and then reading Emerson's opening paragraph. He was a relative unknown at the time, had just published his first book, *Nature*, anonymously and at his own expense. Yes, that unknown. I imagine his eminent listeners thought they were giving him quite a leg up professionally by honoring him with this invitation, and that he would repay them with deference. Here's how his speech opens:

> *Mr. President and Gentlemen,*
>
> *I greet you on the re-commencement of our literary year. Our anniversary is one of hope, and, perhaps, not enough of labor. We do not meet for games of strength or skill, for the recitation of histories, tragedies, and odes, like the ancient Greeks; for parliaments of love and poesy, like the Troubadours; nor for the advancement of science, like our contemporaries in the British and European capitals. Thus far, our holiday has been simply a friendly sign of the survival of the love of letters amongst a people too busy to give to letters any more. As such, it is precious as the sign of an indestructible instinct.*

Sounds like they're about to get what they expected. Then Emerson takes this turn:

> *Perhaps the time is already come, when it ought to be, and will be, something else; when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids, and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt,*

> *that poetry will revive and lead in a new age, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand years?*

Yikes! "Sluggard intellect?" "Mechanical skill?" "Dependence?" "The sere remains of foreign harvests?" "Poetry as the pole-star?" I suspect there was some squirming among the eminent butts in those seats: "Is this what he's saying we are and do? And what we should be doing instead?" Well, yes, it was. You may or may not agree with Emerson's program for pursuing this "something else"—starting first and foremost with immediate experiences in "nature," until "the ancient precept, 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim." Then and only then should one move on to substantive encounters with "the mind of the Past," "books" primarily, "the theory" of which "is noble," unless one concludes that some book or other is "perfect," whereby, "instantly [it] becomes noxious: the guide . . . a tyrant." The antidote to this loss of agency is a mode of reading he defines at one point not as assimilative but "creative," a stunning innovation in thinking about literacy practices. Finally, crucially, one must take "action," which begins by running "eagerly [into] the resounding tumult" of "the world" where an astonishing process of metamorphosis takes place, sometimes in solitude, sometimes in "[d]rudgery, calamity, [and] want," as one achieves "eloquence and wisdom." Absent this last step, in Emerson's view, knowledge remains, well, sluggard, mechanical, dependent, and sere.

I say all of this to make clear, right from the outset, what I have to offer, and want to do, with these posts and, importantly, what I can't. As I said in my first post, I am not even remotely an expert on most of the things I will be writing about here. If that's what you seek, there are countless sources you can turn to: books, YouTubes, podcasts, documentaries, courses, etc., the ones I turn to myself as I work hard, often struggle, to make sense of systems

and ideologies that are not indigenous to my personal experience. I do all of that work because I have never been satisfied with the ones into which I was, and am still being, culturally indoctrinated, mostly unconsciously. They feel like someone else's, not mine. Socrates said at his trial for corrupting the youth of Athens: "The unexamined life is not livable," a more accurate, and humane, translation than the trope that says it is "not worth living." Every life is worth living, including mine, despite its challenges. Examining it simply makes it more livable, at least in his (and my) opinion. The advantage of that is it puts me on common ground with most readers likely to find something of value in these posts, people, like me, who are not "there" yet. So, in advance, I offer both my apologies for when I get things wrong and my advice to consult multiple other sources for their interpretations before you indulge mine as you develop yours.

As to my preferred method: I read everything I read the way I read poems, which is why reading is so hard for me. I place a much greater value on what *I* can make of, and then do with, those words on a page, or in my ear, than on what some expert might tell me they "mean." Like Emerson, I value knowledge that leads to action. There are risks in this, of course, the getting it "wrong" part I mention above, for example. But I prefer to trust my own instincts and my own eyes in this process. As I said to myself often during my turbulent career in the academy: "Just because you're the only one saying (or seeing) something you've worked hard to figure out, doesn't mean you're wrong. You may simply be saying (or seeing) it in the wrong place or at the wrong time. Before you forsake it, try moving. Or waiting." I found the latter especially useful as many of my outlier positions moved from heresy to mainstream, a process that in some cases took decades.

As to that "doing" part, I'll use my first post as an illustration. I like Hopkins' poems, enjoy spending time trying to understand what he sees and how he chooses to say how he sees it. This is

useful knowledge for a literary critic or professor to have. But the real value of all that to me is how it changes the way I see my own world, right here, right now. How, I ask, can I use "instress" as an actual perceptual mechanism to experience, even revel in "inscape?" How can I use "sprung rhythm" to say in a better way what I see happening when I see things that way? Only then, when I have made it all confidently part of my daily practice, can I decide mindfully if and how I want to make those concepts enduring elements of my way of being in the world.

Emerson says this about that:

> *But the final value of action, like that of books, and better than books, is, that it is a resource. That great principle of Undulation in nature, that shows itself in the inspiring and expiring of the breath; in desire and satiety; in the ebb and flow of the sea; in day and night; in heat and cold; and as yet more deeply ingrained in every atom and every fluid, is known to us under the name of Polarity, – these "fits of easy transmission and reflection," as Newton called them, are the law of nature because they are the law of spirit.*
>
> *The mind now thinks; now acts; and each fit reproduces the other. When the artist has exhausted [her] materials, when the fancy no longer paints, when thoughts are no longer apprehended, and books are a weariness, – [she] has always the resource to live. Character is higher than intellect. Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary. The stream retreats to its source. A great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think.*
>
> . . .
>
> *These being [the scholar's] functions, it becomes [her] to feel all confidence in [herself], and to defer never to the*

*popular cry. [She] and [she] only knows the world. The world of any moment is the merest appearance. Some great decorum, some fetish of a government, some ephemeral trade, or war, or man, is cried up by half mankind and cried down by the other half, as if all depended on this particular up or down. The odds are that the whole question is not worth the poorest thought which the scholar has lost in listening to the controversy. Let [her] not quit [her] belief that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom. In silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction, let [her] hold by [herself]; add observation to observation, patient of neglect, patient of reproach; and bide [her] own time, −happy enough, if [she] can satisfy [herself] alone, that this day [she] has seen something truly. Success treads on every right step. For the instinct is sure, that prompts [her] to tell [her] brother[s and sisters] what [she] thinks.*

Emerson goes on a bit too long in his talk, at least for my tastes as a listener. He could have stopped right there, mission accomplished. And I'm quite sure he would approve of my re-gendering that passage, seeing it rightly not as a hopelessly "woke" obsession with pronouns, but a way of saying that no matter how awake you are—and Emerson was pretty awake—there is always a still more wakeful state waiting up ahead, even if it exceeds the limit of your own lifeline. I wish I could become as awake as many of those I'll be writing about in the coming weeks. I will likely not get there in the time I have left. No matter. I feel prompted to try, and to tell brothers and sisters who quest similarly, to the best of my ability, some of the things I see and have left to say, even if they turn out to be wrong. I may be old, but I'm not dead. And, as Robert Frost says about "the road not taken," "that has made all the difference."

While I'm at it, I think I'll give you that Frost poem, one that arose in my mind serendipitously as I was writing that sentence, like Hopkins' poem did the other day during my mid-air collision with that gull downtown, both of us "wired tight to wind." That's how close an inventory of poems is for me in my daily life, other poets', my own, right there, a great gift.

Frost's poem is often alluded to as an anthem for those who seek their own path, follow "the beat of a different drum," the road "less traveled by" the hero of the story. But, hard as I look at it, I just can't see any evidence that the road the traveler took was any more or less traveled by than the one not taken: maybe grassier? but similarly worn and equally leaf strewn. He just picked it, which is what you have to do at such forks, like it or not. The poem seems to me to be more (and in some ways more poignantly) a quiet rendition of how most good lives get lived. You pick this road over that for no overwhelming reason. You just want to at the moment, so you do, walking on at first as if there will be a way back, though deep down you know better. Until one day, when you get to my age, maybe, "way" having led "on to way," you'll be telling the story of that inflection point with a "sigh," lauding the road you took as "less traveled by," even though it wasn't, as you imagine wistfully what might have been down "the road not taken," the poem's title after all, past "where it bent in the undergrowth." My life is rife with junctures of that sort, ones I look back on just that vexedly. I try to be merciful enough just to think instead of talk about them. You're welcome! See what *you* think of the poem:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,*
*And sorry I could not travel both*
*And be one traveler, long I stood*
*And looked down one as far as I could*
*To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,*
*And having perhaps the better claim,*
*Because it was grassy and wanted wear;*
*Though as for that the passing there*
*Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay*
*In leaves no step had trodden black.*
*Oh, I kept the first for another day!*
*Yet knowing how way leads on to way,*
*I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh*
*Somewhere ages and ages hence:*
*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—*
*I took the one less traveled by,*
*And that has made all the difference.*

A student once told me she thought I looked like Emerson. A few months later she commented that she thought Emerson was handsome. Not sure if I can see what she saw, but I appreciated the compliment even if, most likely, she had forgotten the original observation that made it possible for me to hear it as one.

**June 2: In the Spirit … of taking the road not taken**

I've been teasing a piece on quantum mechanics, one of my secondary passions, since I started this page. Today, I'll deliver the first installment on what will be an intermittent series of pieces over the coming months. One of the more exotic mysteries of "reality" at the quantum level is "superposition," the inbuilt capacity of photons and subatomic particles to exist in multiple states simultaneously—particle and wave for example—until they are "measured," which causes these "wave functions," blurry probability fields rather than discrete entities, either to collapse into one of their available options, depending on the specific question the apparatus is set up to ask, or to generate "many worlds," realizing the "futures" of each possible state in other full-fledged universes. There are other even more esoteric ways of accounting for this strange phenomenon, all of which constitute potential solutions to the now famous "measurement problem" vexing that field of study. But these two give you an idea of how formidable this problem is. If you're living in a headspace indoctrinated into the unwavering determinism of Newtonian mechanics—know the current position and velocity of something and you can predict perfectly where it's been and where it's going—which is pretty much all of us living now under the regimes of knowledge invented by Western scientists and philosophers during the Enlightenment, what is now called the "classical paradigm," that's a hard enigma even to swallow, let alone digest.

I was a physics major in college, had a gift for it. And I loved poems, wanted to teach and write them. I started down a path toward a double major but realized in the middle of my junior year, because of the different prerequisite courses required for a BA and a BS, I was either going to have to spend an additional semester in school or pick one. So I picked one: poems. The same

way an electron picks one when you force it to by asking it a stupid question. Despite that, physics has remained a lifelong passion of mine, in superposition with poetry as a wave function in my intellectual life—the answer to Robert Frost's conundrum standing where those "two roads diverged in a yellow wood:" Take them both, Bob! My math skills evaporated pretty quickly on the road "less traveled by" that everyone else thought I was on; but not my fascination with theory on the road I had only apparently "not taken."

In *Willing Spirit* I explore the very salutary ethical effects that arise when you shift your internal allegiance from the classical paradigm to the quantum paradigm. I use an assortment of paired terms (not binaries, simply alternatives, a crucial distinction) to work out the details of this thought experiment: stability/ emergence, outside/inside, deterministic/probabilistic, certitude/ uncertainty, vacuum/field, and isolated/entangled. Every now and then over the coming months I'll pick one of them to explain in detail, culminating with the most amazing, entanglement, which Erwin Schrödinger, an early guru of quantum mechanics, the inventor of his eponymous wave equation, says "is not one but rather *the* characteristic trait of quantum mechanics, *the one that enforces its entire departure from classical lines thought"* (italics mine.) Here's how I set up that project:

> *Quantum mechanics has been around now for over a century, with new developments emerging all the time. It is, then, a paradigm still in the making. . . But what it proffers is so appealing to me as a contrary to the [still-dominant classical paradigm] that I decided . . . to create a thought experiment that could install this new paradigm not simply as a body of knowledge but as a way of being in the world.*
>
> *Which gets me to what I want to talk about here, hearkening back to Schrödinger: the influence of the*

*"classical" paradigm on our everyday attitudes and values, and how they would change if we adapted our "lines of thinking" to a "quantum" paradigm. None of this requires or assumes even a cursory let alone a professional understanding of either the physics or philosophy of those systems. The vast majority of those living during the 18th-20th centuries, the heydays of the classical paradigm, knew next to nothing about Newton or Descartes, say. But if you examine the taken-for-granted systems that organized their economic, religious, and social lives, and the various subsystems they invented to implement them, the influence is unmistakable. Likewise, almost no one, including the scientists who study it, claims now to fully understand how reality operates at the quantum level. I simply want to think about the differences between the classical and quantum paradigms. I'm going to do that via a series of contrasted concepts, one derived from classical mechanics one from quantum mechanics, and then try to imagine the new one into my daily life.*

I'll start today with

**Stability/Emergence:**

In the classical paradigm, our universe is fixed in space, stable, its basic laws and structures universal and immutable. Things move around, come and go, of course, but the matrix within which that happens is organized by measurable causal and temporal relationships, one thing predictably connected to the next, etc. It is important to remember in this regard that until the 20th century we assumed that our galaxy was the entirety of the universe, and that even Einstein resisted the notion that the universe was expanding, despite evidence to the contrary. That's how powerful the classical paradigm is. The quantum universe is, on the contrary, always churning up, evolving in a quasi-Darwinian sense. Change

then is not aberrant but endemic and causality is never entirely calculable.

Translate this distinction into the realm of personal identity and the implications are obvious and consequential. The classical model implies that personal identity, including the "self," is focal, singular and quite durable. In effect, as Popeye says, channeling Descartes, "I am what I am and that's all what I am." Change is of course both possible and inevitable, with age, education, life experiences, etc. But no matter all of that, one's personal mantra would remain "I am what I am." A quantum paradigm tends to reduce identity, especially the self, to something like the froth that Daoists and Buddhists claim is floating on the surface of the flux of experience, a barely-there matrix that provides the illusion of fixity and permanence, presumed to be extrinsic from, superior to, and somehow in control of everything else. Quantum systems are chronically emergent, always in flux, one thing or state evolving into another and back again. There is no out-there durably there. And no in-here reliably here.

At a behavioral level, what shifting to the quantum paradigm invites me to do is define my "life" not as a chronology of causally connected events trailing off endlessly into the past, the present merely a diminishing mote in time; but as a series of extended moments each of which is the future emergent in the now. Change is not an irritation or challenge, it is the essence of life in time, one my spirit can and should yield to willingly (recalling my book's title) rather than resist mightily. One of my go-to sources for describing this way of thinking about experience is Mikhail Bakhtin, most especially his concept of the "unfinalizability" of human identity as he outlines it in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929). He introduces the concept this way, describing the distinctively realistic way Dostoevsky deploys his characters:

> *They all acutely sense their own inner unfinalizability, their capacity to outgrow, as it were, from within and to render untrue any externalizing and finalizing definition of them. As long as a person is alive [s]he lives by the fact that [s]he is not yet finalized, that [s]he has not yet uttered the ultimate word*. (highlight his, 59)

As long as one is alive, he implies, there is never an "ultimate word;" and every "externalizing . . . definition" is by its nature "untrue," to hale forward the quantum paradigm I want to valorize. Bakhtin then generalizes it this way, as it applies to human life in the world:

> *A [wo]man never coincides with [her]self. One cannot apply to [her] the formula of A=A . . . [T]he genuine life of the personality takes place at the point of non-coincidence between a [wo]man and [her]self." . . . The genuine life of the personality is made available only through a dialogic penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself.* (highlight his, 59)

I especially like that baffling second sentence, which suggests to me that "the personality" of an individual can only be "genuine" when one is non-coincidental with oneself, a kind of radical freedom from the before and after in the moment, which is related to the A that was already there but alters it into something non- or extra-A in the serendipity of the interaction with time, such that "the formula of A=A" "cannot apply." Ever. This to me is a good template for understanding identity as an emergent rather than stable construct. Same with "truth," which Bakhtin defined as "polyphonic," multi-vocal, not an authoritative pronouncement but a mélange of mutually proffered, arguable, often contradictory and logically inconsistent statements. Truth, he says, cannot be held within a single mind, it also cannot be expressed by "a single

mouth." The "reality" imagined by the quantum paradigm shares all of those features.

Bakhtin's biography is a good demonstration of this difference. He wrote most of an essay called "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" in the 1930s, when he was in his 30s. He was quite aware of Einstein's theory of relativity. But quantum mechanics was too new to be of much relevance to his thinking about these matters. That portion of the essay is primarily a taxonomic catalogue of standard chronotopes (literally "timespaces," channeling Einstein) for organizing Western modes of storytelling. When the essay finally reached the West in the 1980s it included a section called "Concluding Remarks." A brief footnote says simply that this addendum "was written in 1973." The difference between these two parts, proffered seamlessly, could not be more extreme. The former is "classical" historiography, the latter is a swirl of insights both cooperating and competing with one another, which explains the sort of whiplash one experiences after crossing the speedbump that footnote points to, like exiting Newtonian space and entering quantum space. Bakhtin's work was largely suppressed for ideological reasons until the 1960s. But he was clearly thinking and paying attention. He doesn't get to "show us the work," but the two "answers" his rhetorical calculations proffer—one developed in the 1930s, the other in the 1970s—could not be more at odds with one another. What was stable becomes emergent, what was classical feels quantum.

One prominent symptom of this shift is pertinent to the concept of change itself. In the classical universe change happens gradually along a continuous path when energy, as force, say, is added to or subtracted from a system. In the quantum universe change can only happen in integer leaps from one level to another, up or down. Until the specifically required amount of energy is added to or subtracted from a system, it remains stable. Electron probability paths in atoms are a good example of this. Only

certain states are allowable and change from one to another happens abruptly not gradually. In other words, evolutionary change in quantum systems happens suddenly not incrementally. The terms biologists use to mark that difference are gradualism vs. punctualism. The basic imperative I take from this as I plan out the changes I want to effect in my own life is this: It will take the input of a certain "quantum" of energy to produce any effect at all. And adding that minimum amount of energy will take a certain "quantum" of time. That requires work, constant day to day work, often (at least for me) months or years of it. The change of level or state I aspire toward will occur suddenly at some point, but it will not happen providentially. The ability to keep adding energy to the system via that work without immediate results requires discipline and faith, which hearkens back to what it means, in practice, to have a genuinely "willing spirit."

**June 7: In the Spirit … of spending time in the dark**

A friend and I occasionally talk about specific poems. A couple of weeks ago she read me one I was unfamiliar with from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Book of Hours*, a beautiful poem about the dark. That's what got me started thinking toward this post, which is made mostly of poems, a treat I hope for both of us.

The figurative foundation of yin-yang in Chinese epistemology is the intimate interplay of dark (yin) and light (yang) on a mountain, one predominating on one side, one on the other. Poets have, historically, had deep connections with that mutual dynamism, sometimes foregrounding light, sometimes dark, both of which can be exquisitely beautiful. I have a particular affinity for poems that wander on the darker side of that mountain, and so do the poets I include here. I'll start with one of my own, called "This Dark is Mine," written after my wife Carol died suddenly 10 year ago, part of a group of poems called *In the Dark*:

*Every night in the woods*
*these trees reach out,*
*caress one another,*
*leaf to leaf in summer,*
*shadow into shadow*
*twining on the ground*
*all winter, multiplying*
*moonlight, starlight,*
*what care is, not giving,*
*taking, just there, always*
*in the air, a way of prayer.*

*The light we reach into*
*day after day, not*
*destination, wisdom,*

*I hear them say, simply*
*where we find what*
*we need to survive.*
*Down below, in that dark,*
*we are rooted, share*
*everything, care*
*for each other, rear*
*our young, prepare*
*for storms, wind, cold;*
*there, the trillion tiny*
*highways from here*
*to everywhere,*
*how we live as one,*
*out of your sight,*
*not out of ours.*
*Look now to what*
*holds you deep down.*
*There the dark is yours.*

*At the top of the hill*
*where I always first feel*
*what today I decided to call*
*a holiness in this place,*
*the tall, lean poplar*
*on my right, speaking*
*for all the trees,*
*their collaborative voice,*
*said: Take care now,*
*Paul, this dark is yours.*
*Show no fear.*
*It was always there*
*waiting for you, the way*
*from where you are*
*to where you go.*

*Take heart from us.*
*We will meet you here*
*every morning, cheer you,*
*the September daylight*
*so bright, so clear,*
*this light we love and use.*
*But we are specialists*
*of the dark, know all*
*its ways. Remember,*
*so are you, so do you.*

That should give you a sense of what my in-built taste for "the dark" is and why, when I have to, I yield to its imperatives rather than try to skirt, shirk, or deny it. And why some of my favorite poets are inclined likewise.

Here's that poem from Rilke:

*I love the dark hours of my being.*
*My mind deepens into them.*
*There I can find, as in old letters,*
*the days of my life, already lived*
*and held like a legend, and understood.*

*Then the knowing comes: I can open*
*to another life that's wide and timeless.*

*So I am sometimes like a tree*
*rustling over a gravesite*
*and making real the dream*
*of the one its living roots*
*embrace:*

*a dream once lost*
*among sorrows and songs.*

There is a very special kind of "knowing" the "comes" in the dark. "Wide and timeless" are not metaphors in this case; they are exact descriptions of what it feels like to be there, instant and eternity one and the same. Likewise with "sorrows and songs," indistinguishable. Here's another poem from the same section of his book that accentuates the transcendence that becomes possible only in the dark:

*I come home from the soaring*
*in which I lost myself.*
*I was song, and the refrain which is God*
*is still roaring in my ears*

*Now I am still*
*and plain:*
*no more words.*

*To the others I was like a wind:*
*I made them shake.*
*I'd gone very far, as far as the angels,*
*and high where light thins into nothing.*
*But deep in the darkness is God. . .*

"Myself" disappearing, "lost," into "song;" "still and plain," again, not metaphors but descriptions. "No more words," and then more words follow, the ineffable pressing to be said even as it declares it can't be! And God "deep in the darkness" just past "where light thins to nothing," as good a definition of the godly as you're ever likely to find.

Here's a poem from Emily Dickinson, a genius of light and dark. Among her poems that foreground the latter you're probably most familiar with those about death, which have a stoically, sometimes sardonically, macabre, aspect, poems like "I heard a fly buzz when I died" or "Because I could not stop for death," precise studies of those states of mind that are neither here nor there, spiritually speaking. The one I'll give here may not on the

surface seem so obviously dark, but is, to me, a brilliant depiction of the "dark" state of mind that often arises in temperaments like hers and mine for no obvious reason even remotely commensurate with its effect:

*There's a certain Slant of light,*
*Winter Afternoons –*
*That oppresses, like the Heft*
*Of Cathedral Tunes –*

*Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –*
*We can find no scar,*
*But internal difference –*
*Where the Meanings, are –*

*None may teach it – Any –*
*'Tis the seal Despair –*
*An imperial affliction*
*Sent us of the Air –*

*When it comes, the Landscape listens –*
*Shadows – hold their breath –*
*When it goes, 'tis like the Distance*
*On the look of Death –*

I'm prone to such sudden "affliction[s]" "Sent us of the Air," which highlight "internal difference—/ Where the Meanings, are—" that last comma hinting at the haltingness of language in that space, its inability to express what exactly these meanings are. In their immediate aftermath such "Heavenly Hurt[s]" leave the inside of one's head feeling like a fire-blackened forest, incinerated but primed for new growth even before the smoke evaporates. That sort of darkness is pristine, austere, quite beautiful. Dickinson's poem is all that, too, the dash at the end telling you "the Distance" opens outward rather than closes in.

Here's another Dickinson poem of the sort I aspire to write for "my tiny poems from olympia" Instagram page:

*Absence disembodies—so does Death*
*Hiding individuals from the Earth*
*Superstition helps, as well as love—*
*Tenderness decreases as we prove—*

Dickinson was not a Daoist, of course. But she shares their deep understanding of "Absence" as the reservoir of being. There's a lot going on in this poem, and as with so many of hers I can only make my best guesses about most of it. Being apart from those we love, as she was for most of her life, even as she lived in her father's house with her soulmate Susan Huntington living right next door, married to her brother, of all things, requires a soul of substance, with tenacity. But when love is true, those absent are yet present, both disembodied and there, as if they never left. That's where imagination takes on a deep moral clarity. As to that "tenderness?" Well, my guess is it is the sensitivity of our own wounds that "decreases" as we prove, even if only to ourselves, that love can persist creatively, the way yeast "proves" itself in the leavening. That's how "the dark" comes into this. Or maybe not. Hard to tell what is in or out with Dickinson. I just like the poem, so I put it in here.

Another poem about the dark I really like is Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," a deceptively sing-songy poem I personally find hauntingly beautiful:

*Whose woods these are I think I know.*
*His house is in the village, though;*
*He will not see me stopping here*
*To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

*My little horse must think it queer*
*To stop without a farmhouse near*

*Between the woods and frozen lake*
*The darkest evening of the year.*

*He gives his harness bells a shake*
*To ask if there is some mistake.*
*The only other sound's the sweep*
*Of easy wind and downy flake.*

*The woods are lovely, dark, and deep.*
*But I have promises to keep,*
*And miles to go before I sleep,*
*And miles to go before I sleep.*

I particularly like the puzzlement of the horse to be stopping in the middle of nowhere, just woods and frozen lake. That is exactly the allure of the dark, the mesmerizing attraction of its infinite next to nothingness. And, honestly, I think the horse is smart enough to know that it is not a "mistake" at all. Which reminds me of a poem by James Wright, "A Blessing," with a couple of ponies in it, one I was thinking about the other day while I was walking, can't remember why. If you know anything about James Wright's poems, in my opinion among the best of the last half of the 20th century, and about his life, which was wracked with incredible suffering and hardship, I think you will understand that only someone who has spent some serious time in the dark can feel a blessing as "the eyes of those two Indian ponies/ Darken with kindness":

*Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,*
*Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.*
*And the eyes of those two Indian ponies*
*Darken with kindness.*
*They have come gladly out of the willows*
*To welcome my friend and me.*
*We step over the barbed wire into the pasture*
*Where they have been grazing all day, alone.*

*They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness*
*That we have come.*
*They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.*
*There is no loneliness like theirs.*
*At home once more,*
*They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.*
*I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,*
*For she has walked over to me*
*And nuzzled my left hand.*
*She is black and white,*
*Her mane falls wild on her forehead,*
*And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear*
*That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.*
*Suddenly I realize*
*That if I stepped out of my body I would break*
*Into blossom.*

"They love each other" and "there is no loneliness like theirs." In the dark, you know if you have loved or lost there, this is not a contradiction. Love and loneliness are one, quite movingly. In moments of such a recognition, you do "step… out of [your] body" and "break/ Into blossom."

I'll conclude with the final poem from my book (called *"This is not even a half-book yet, but I want so bad to be done with it, because I'm already where I needed to get, and I really think I wrote enough so you can get there, too, if you want to . . ."*) just so you know how truly happy and loved you can feel if you follow poems far enough into the dark:

*There is a dark only poems can get to.*
*I wrote as many of those for you*
*as I had in me, today, this month*
*my whole life, all there for you to find.*

*Then there's that dark another layer down,*
*the one I was so hoping to find again,*

*willing to write a hundred pages of poems*
*in a month to get to it, and I'm there now,*
*finally, there, a dark like the most perfect*
*late September night of your whole life,*
*10 PM and you've been out in the yard*
*for two hours already, shirtsleeve warm,*
*a dark your eyes are acclimated to,*
*watching the stars flicker on one by one*
*then tons of them, overwhelming*
*the sky, swathed now in layers of dark,*
*a tiny slice of moon off to the left,*
*just enough to overfill you with*
*the dark that all that light makes*
*visible, and I could try to tell you*
*what it is like, a dark that makes*
*no sound at all, a dark that absorbs*
*and quiets all thinking, a mile-deep pile*
*of soft, black velvet, say, that you just*
*lay back into and you're settling*
*deeper and deeper down in its warm*
*embrace, or a lake no one else knows about,*
*looking-glass still and you're 50 feet*
*deep into it looking up and you can still*
*breathe and see every bit of dark*
*in the whole universe beginning to end.*

*Then you are happy. Then you are there.*
*Then you are done with the poems*
*you needed to write to get you there,*
*for today, this month, next year, forever,*
*having used them so beautifully, just*
*what they are good for, portals toward*
*a dark so gentle, so sensuous, you can spend*
*this night, every night, the rest of your life*
*cradled, tenderly, in one another's warm arms.*

. . .

Rainer Maria Rilke's poems from *Rilke's Book of Hours*, trans. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy, Riverside Books, 1996.

Emily Dickinson's poems from *Final Harvest*, Little Brown, 1961.

Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, Henry Holt and Company, 1969.

James Wright's "A Blessing" from *The Branch Will Not Break*, Wesleyan U Press, 1963.

Here is a link to the page on my website where you can find both a PDF and an audiobook of *In the Dark*:

https://paulkameen.com/?page_id=2280

**June 11: In the Spirit … of making the two one**

*Knowing the masculine*
*and nurturing the feminine*
*you become a river of all beneath heaven.*
*River of all beneath heaven*
*you abide by perennial Integrity*
*and so return to infancy.*

Laotzi, the *Daodejing*

*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."*

Jesus, the Gospel of Thomas

*Creative individuals to a certain extent escape this rigid [male/female] gender role stereotyping.*

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*

It's rare to find origin sources in both Eastern and Western traditions in sort-of agreement about much of anything. But here's one. Laozi and Jesus are pretty smart "creative individuals," and both have a great deal to say about "making the two one," a powerful antidote to Western habits of polar-binary thinking. But what are they trying to say here specifically in relation to gender identities? What does that have to do with being childlike? And how might it all apply in our current cultural moment where, at least on the American side, the gender binary is so hyper-accentuated that a seventh grader can end up in front of the Supreme Court to flog his constitutional right to wear a T-shirt to school asserting "THERE ARE ONLY TWO GENDERS?"

I took the trouble in a previous post to re-gender pronouns in a quote from R.W. Emerson's essay "The American Scholar," insisting it was not merely a "woke" gesture. Many of the wisest minds in human history, including Laozi and Jesus, insist that overriding binary gender categories is a crucial step on the path to enlightenment, a two-into-one alchemy that somehow also entangles infancy. Re-gendering pronouns, not just in someone else's text but in our own heads is, they insist, essential to that process.

Let me clear at the outset: This process has nothing to do with whether you are biologically male or female, situated anywhere on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, or even with gender equity, though that would be a tacit consequence of it. It has to do with how one conserves and organizes, toward a greater purpose, the range of qualities, mental faculties, and abilities we are naturally endowed with. That's how infancy enters the equation, as in: You had it together back then, now you don't, so wake up. And it has nothing to do with metempsychosis or transmigration, an infant somehow remembering what she knew before she got here, then forgetting it at birth or shortly thereafter, the way William Wordsworth puts it, for example, in his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood:"

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;*
*The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,*
*Hath had elsewhere its setting*
*And cometh from afar. . .*
*. . . trailing clouds of glory . . .*
*From God, who is our home . . .*

There are elements of this paradigm that Laozi and Jesus would endorse: Daoism is premised on a kind of eternal recycling between the "elsewhere" of Absence and the "here" of Presence; Christianity is premised on "God, who is our home." But in neither case is being born the problem, "a sleep and a forgetting" inevitable once you get here. As I read these texts, they say exactly the opposite, that you come into this life with a pretty good toolkit, a broad spectrum of assets. Whether you call the source of those gifts Dao, God, Nature, or evolution is not the point. You're supposed to maintain and use them all, including the ones that are not marked from the outset as gender-specific, but become so under the toxic tutelage of gender-dysfunctional cultures. Sleep and forgetting don't just happen, they are induced.

One contemporary term we use to describe this gender-agnosticism is androgyny, as in this passage from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*:

> *But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body,and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness? And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in*

> *harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. . .; that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. (98)*

I've been preoccupied with this particular sort of "spiritual cooperation" ever since I was about 4 years old, sitting on the back porch steps of my home in Forest City, Pennsylvania, a scene of awakening I document in some detail in a chapter called "He Tells Her Their Story" in my book *Living Hidden*. I was getting more and more "vexed and miffed" as I began to speculate about what was about to happen to my nascent sense of myself as a "creative individual" as I transitioned into a "boy" and then a "man" in the 1950s American culture that even a four-year-old could see was dysfunctional in relation to gender. Obviously, I didn't have the discourse or experience to pursue this line of thinking critically. All I knew was I didn't fit neatly into the basic stereotypes that were already being enforced with a vengeance to shape my identity "masculine." And I decided, with a similar vengeance, that I wasn't going to accede to them, that I would somehow conserve a wholistic sense of the "we" who "I" was right then by "living hidden." I understood that this would require considerable ingenuity, as learning how to "pass" in a context inimical to one's preferred "essence" always does. So I set myself to that task. I know how preposterous this sounds, even to me, thinking back on it. A four-year-old? Give me a break. But I also know it was true, not so much at the level of language or thought, but of feelings, sitting there on those steps, fuming, yes, at the inanity of the world around me, the one I was going to have navigate a way through, but also fierce, determined not to give in to its meanest stereotypes.

But enough about me. I want to get back to what Laozi and Jesus have to say about this, beginning by stating the obvious: Both were born into stridently patriarchal cultures and they didn't make much of a dent in either of theirs, at least as it pertains to gender. Laozi may or may not have existed as an actual singular person. The *Daodejing* was composed (mostly) between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE, as the "Spring and Autumn" period in Chinese history transitioned into the "Warring States" period. Any historical epoch that is remembered via those two words, "warring" and "states," is highly unlikely to valorize "the feminine." Likewise for Jesus. The matter of gender equity let alone (God forbid!) gender blending, was not up for grabs in his Jewish community or the Roman Empire in which it was embedded. "Warring" and "states" would be good monikers for his era as well, and for pretty much the whole of Western history thereafter, so deeply infused with Roman militancy, which became Christian militancy in the 4th century CE, a paradigm that endures to this day. That's a long time for not much to change. So what's the point, you might fairly ask of doing all this work of waking up, gender-wise, when it hasn't had a significant impact on the culture at large? All the validation I need is it didn't seem pointless to Laozi or Jesus, pretty good testimony on its behalf.

So let me try to unpack some of this, starting with Laozi, the Ur-thinker for what came to be called Daoism, now enjoying a resurgence, especially among Westerners looking for a life-, gender-, and earth-friendly spiritual alternative to the capitalist regime. Daoism is founded in a fundamental oneness that surpasses both human understanding and expression, Dao (or Way) the unity that precedes duality and multiplicity, as Laozi explains:

*Way gave birth to one,*
*and one gave birth to two.*
*Two gave birth to three*
*and three gave birth to the ten thousand things.*

*Then the ten thousand things shouldered yin and embraced yang blending ch'i to establish harmony. (#42)*

In Daoism yin/yang dualities are never polar binaries, as in Western systems. They are always intertwined with one another, in "harmony." The traditional symbol for representing those dualities is the *taijitu,* that familiar circle with complementary tear-shaped swirls of black and white, each with a dot of the other within it, like locking tabs that link them inseparably. The original figurative source of this relationship between dark and light was a mountain, its northern yin-face shaded, its southern yang-face brighter. A mountain is not two things, it's one. And as with everything in nature "under the sun," there is never a complete separation of the dark from the light during its diurnal cycle. In the Daoist system, the female is yin, the male yang. The fact that the female is on "the dark side" might seem ominous to a Western mind, where dualities tend to be organized hierarchically, in this case, light over dark. A Daoist mind doesn't work that way. In fact, in this specific case, if there is a hierarchy, it is counter to the one instinctive to a Western imagination. The animating force that moves pretty much everything we see and know, or can't because it's beyond our ken, Laozi calls "dark female-enigma," as in this passage:

> *The valley spirit never dies*
> *It's called dark female-enigma*
> *And the gateway of dark female-enigma*
> *Is called the root of heaven and earth (#6)*

Or "dark-enigma integrity," as in this one:

> *Can you let your spirit embrace primal unity*
> *Without drifting away?*
> *Can you focus ch'i into such softness*
> *you're a newborn again …*
> *Can you be female*

*opening and closing heaven's gate?. . .*
*Give birth and nurture.*
*Give birth without possessing*
*and foster without domineering:*
*This is called dark-enigma integrity. (#10)*

Dark-enigma is, like Dao, a name Laozi uses for the nameless source of everything. Integrity is the "de" in Daodejing. So it's a big deal. And it's feminine. The feminine also often serves as a template for what Laozi calls *wu wei* or "nothing's own doing," the ability to overcome self-centered drives and desires and accede to the flow of Dao the way everything else in the natural universe does when it is healthy. *Wu wei* is a kind of passivity that inspires spontaneity, in-the-moment being; it is the source of creativity, the motive for compassion, the origin point of wisdom, the portal to enlightenment, a combination of connotations that has no clear counterpart in Western thinking. None of this is to say that it belongs only to women [although Daoism was and is user-friendly to women in communal matters.] Laozi's point is the same one I felt on those porch steps, the same one Virginia Woolf sees in that taxi: We are, all of us, born with an innate capacity to fuse twos into ones, including gender traits, and then we are trained quite stringently to override it, to become half-ourselves.

For Laozi, female energy generally shares many of the features we associate with the feminine in Western systems: soft, receptive, nurturing. The difference is that these qualities are valorized rather than demeaned. One of the tropes for that is "the mother:

*There was something all murky shadow,*
*born before heaven and earth . . .*
*Isolate and changeless*
*it moves everywhere without fail*
*picture the mother of all beneath heaven. (#25)*

. . .
*There is a source all beneath heaven shares:*
*call it the mother of all beneath heaven.*
*Once you understand the mother*
*you understand the child,*
*and once you understand the child*
*you abide in the mother. . . .*
*Seeing the small is called enlightenment,*
*and abiding in the gentle strength. (#52)*

And this is how, by seeing the small and abiding in the gentle, the child comes into the frame, the original strong and enlightened one we're supposed to conserve in us, or to recover if she has been abused or exiled. Female tendencies are lauded even in warfare, when various kinds of "giving," including retreat and compassion, are said always to win, sooner or later, over brute force:

*A great nation flows down into*
*the place where all beneath heaven converges,*
*the female of all beneath heaven.*
*In its stillness, female lies perpetually low,*
*and there perpetually conquers male. (#61)*

Again, the point is not to replace men with women in positions of power because they are innately better for that, it is to reimagine how the qualities and tendencies we associate with gender categories can remain in (or be restored to) a cooperative and generative balance. Since in patriarchal cultures the female traits are most demeaned, they are the ones most in need of recovery. If you are looking for of a map to do that, bell hooks offers a pretty good one in *The Will to Change*, addressed primarily to men but useful to women as well who are just as captive to the gender-related toxicity of patriarchy, but in converse ways.

This is precisely the point Jesus is making in the Gospel of Thomas, which was excised with prejudice from the Christian canon in the 4th century CE along with many others we now call "lost." It was pretty scary to get "lost" during the heresy heydays of the early Church, lots of burning and burying, that sort of thing! Most of those gospels were founded, from the Church "fathers'" point of view, on the gnostic heresy, a particular kind of radical dualism that, among other things, accords considerable authority to the individual at the expense of the clerical hierarchy. So they had to go. The Gospel of Thomas is different; it promotes the latter—individual authority—but via a two-into-one rather than one-into-two dynamic.

Patriarchy is hard to override, of course. In the context of the gospel of Thomas Jesus couldn't even persuade most of his disciples to change their tune in this regard. Simon Peter (the original "Rock") is particularly belligerent about it:

> *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." (#114 Noah translation)*

Jesus is having none of 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. Jesus is not, though, interested in indoctrinating Mary or his female disciples into an ideology of patriarchy. He is talking here, I believe, about a form of androgyny, 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 impedes one's path to "the kingdom of heaven."

How the Christian culture became so stringently patriarchal, even misogynistic (just last year, 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 from Jesus’ highly favored follower (see the lost Gospel of Mary, e.g.) and friend, perhaps even partner, to a repentant sex-worker, except to say that Paul initiated the process and it got gradually amplified, especially by Augustine, during the Romanization of the Church.

Here is another example of the gender-tension among Jesus’ disciples:

*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."* (#21)

Mary is obviously a prominent enough disciple to ask Jesus a direct question (a feminine assertiveness 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. All of this is punctuated by the "ears to hear" trope that Jesus repeats when he's trying to get his disciples to wake up. It seems clear to me in context that Jesus is not talking solely about gender tolerance in his little group, though he wouldn't mind it if these guys lightened up. He's talking about the need for overriding gender distinctions entirely:

*You [must] make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female . . . (#22)*

Can't be much clearer than that. This collapse of the gender binary is ensconced in the context of a more general collapse of all binaries:

*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 . . . (#22)*

Here is a passage where Jesus explains this two-into-one enigma:

*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."* (#48)

The "one house" here is not communal, out there, but personal, in here. Reconciliation between the two (rather than faith, as in Matthew 7:20) is the means for moving mountains with a simple

command, a dramatic shift in the conception of where spiritual power is founded.

This passage is darker and more dramatic:

> *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."* (#61)

What I see here (besides 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. And light is where it's at for Jesus:

> *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.'"* (#50)

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 unified and can return to that state whenever we choose, actually must, Jesus says, to have any hope of entering the kingdom of heaven, which is not "up there" but right here.

The culmination of all this must be a full makeover:

> *. . . 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. (#22)*

I personally take Jesus to mean that one needs to rebuild oneself from the ground up to create an authentic likeness in place of the generic simulacrum 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," the point of it all. Which gets me back to my personal story, which I conclude this way:

> *And that's when it struck me, yes, exactly that, which is why I'm telling this story: Everyone is born with an almost equal balance of he and she in there, masculine and feminine, though they are not named yet that way, therefore remain unified, indistinct from one another, amicable, interactive, quite peaceable before the binary lies culture tells you to force you down one road or the other, from day one, take this one or that, but you can't take both. And I mean really take it to the extreme, no keeping the other even in sight, no turning back either, ever. . . .*
>
> *And right then I thought about the "he" in there and I thought about the "she" in there, how beautiful they were, so alike and so close together, loving one another, true love, I mean, not lovey-dovey love, before they got turned*

*into words, I mean, before time started clicking, before the road not taken got taken away, and this is what I decided: He will never give her away, and she will never give him away. They are married now and will not be divorced, though those, too, were lies I hadn't yet learned how to name. I also knew that he would have to cherish her in secret to get by, and she would have to cherish him in secret to get by, the origins for, I now think, and the ultimate explanation for, my reclusive temperament, which you know, if you have one, is not soft but fierce, will not brook interference, impregnable, the perfect way to hide what was mine from whatever and whoever might want to take it away, a temperament you aren't necessarily born with, but choose on the top step of the back porch pulling at the bottoms of your shorts or your dress, which are almost the same thing when you're four or so, because it is only in the hiding that true love can flourish, at least inside one's head, that room of one's own, the only one we will ever truly own. . . .*

*And that was the day I became a "creative individual" and started living hidden in earnest, as a way of maintaining the joy of the oneness of the twoness we are all born with*. (*Living Hidden*, 56-57)

Again: Two roads? Take them both. Together, and only together, "they" are the "Way" to "the kingdom of heaven."

. . .

All Laozi excerpts from *Tao Te Ching,* translated by David Hinton (Counterpoint Press, 2015)

All excerpts from the Gospel of Thomas are from the Lambdin translation (the Gnostic Society Library) except the one marked in the text from the Noah translation.

Virginia Woolf excerpt from *A Room of One's Own.* Harcourt, 1929.

Here is a link to my website page with a PDF of *Living Hidden*: https://paulkameen.com/?page_id=6885. A paperback version is available on Amazon.com.

## June 15: In the Spirit … of "No Kings"

Right wing pols and pundits are engaging in all sorts of rhetorical gymnastics to differentiate between the violence on January 6th (a "day of love") and the almost entirely peaceful protests now happening in the streets of LA and across the country (send in the Marines!) For Mike Johnson, there is a "clear distinction," though he can't specify what that is. John Thune punts on the question of "inconsistency" by saying that "local officials [in LA], for whatever reason, didn't seem up to the task of getting the job done there," as if the Capital Police had things well in hand in Washington. There is, of course, a duplicitous absurdity to these statement. What I want to focus on here, though, is something deeper than such self-serving justifications made in the name of political expediency: the larger moral question raised by using military tactics to effect the indiscriminate mass-deportation of immigrants. Both Johnson and Thune (and pretty much every other one on their side of this argument) claim to be "good" Christians. Thune has said that "at an early age, I made a profession of faith in Christ, and that's been the foundation for pretty much everything I do." Johnson said in an interview with Sean Hannity "I am a Bible-believing Christian . . . Someone asked me today in the media, they said, 'It's curious. People are curious. What does Mike Johnson think about any issue under the sun?' I said, 'Well, go pick up a Bible off your shelf and read it.' That's my worldview. That's what I believe." Well, I have in fact picked up a Bible from time to time in my life, and I have given some consideration to what Jesus actually said about matters of this sort, as they are recorded there. That's what I want to focus on here.

Every religious or ethical system I'm aware of has a version of the Golden Rule at its core. The one we're most familiar with in our culture is the Christian injunction to "love your neighbor as

yourself," Jesus' "second commandment," which appears in exactly that form in each of the three synoptic gospels (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27.) When it comes to matters of behavioral ethics, there are lots of differences among those gospels. For example, the famous Sermon on the Mount, delivered to the masses, appears only in Matthew, the eight Beatitudes that lead it expressed spiritually ("Blessed are the *poor in spirit* . . ." e.g.) In Luke it's a sermon on a plain, delivered to a smaller audience, with only four Beatitudes, all expressed materially ("Blessed are you who *are poor* . . . ." e.g.), followed by four contrasting "woes" that will befall those on the other end of the spectrum ("Woe to you who *are rich* . . ." e.g.) The Beatitudes are absent in Mark. All of which is to say that you have to spend some time to meditate into your own personal practices what these imperatives should mean. In the case of the first Beatitude, for example, does this mean I have to identify with the poor or literally become poor to enter the kingdom? Good question. In the case of the "second commandment," though, there is no confusion. All the gospelists agree. Jesus said this, exactly this. So what does or should it mean for how I behave in the world?

The first commandment, of course, is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," which also appears in all three gospels in that form (Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). This establishes a relationship between these two complementary modes of love, what ultimately got ensconced in Christian ideology (via Augustine first, then Thomas Aquinas) as the "*ordo amoris*," the order of love that J.D. Vance so famously got "wrong" (according to two Popes, which is a pretty good indication that it is wrong in Catholic ideology) in his defense of mass deportations and cutting humanitarian aid to other countries. Vance's argument is most likely founded on a misreading of passages in 1 Timothy 5:8 and Acts1:8, both of which remind congregations that love is not a hierarchical stairway that you can ascend partially according to your personal

(i.e., selfish) preferences. In order to arrive at Vance's conclusion—"There is a Christian concept that you love your family and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens, and then after that, prioritize the rest of the world"—you have to do with those passages what Christians did with the three or four Biblical passages they used routinely to justify slavery, contort them beyond any sense. Timothy and Acts make it clear that love is a uniform condition. If it has any steps, it is first God, then yourself, then everyone. As in EVERYONE!

Pope Leo was quite straightforward in his response: "JD Vance is wrong: Jesus doesn't ask us to rank our love for others." No, he doesn't, ever. Pope Francis said, likewise, that "true *ordo amoris*" involves building "a fraternity open to all, without exception." Yes, without exception. This is the foundational promise at the heart of Christianity that very, very few Christians are able to live up to, understandably, because it's really hard! Which is why, like Vance, they spend so much energy trying to find escape hatches in sources that can be twisted to say something different from what Jesus said. Timothy is no slouch, but he's not Jesus, so why would you ever work so hard to use what he says (even if he said it, which he didn't) to contravene what Jesus says plainly and clearly? Well, because you can't or won't do what is being asked of you, so you create a more comfortable alternative, one that lets you off the hook for real moral investment.

If you want one (and there are many) of Jesus' direct refutations of Vance's position (i.e., if the word of two Popes isn't enough for you), you don't have to look far from his "second commandment" to find it. His famous parable of the "good Samaritan" is delivered immediately, in Luke, in response to an "expert in the law" (like Johnson or Thune, say) who "stood up to test him," because (again like Johnson and Thune) he "wanted to justify himself" (i.e., maintain his sense of social and cultural

privilege in this regard). He asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

> *In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denari and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'*

Look first at the two "other side of the road" guys. One is a priest, implying that while it may be common to assume that one's particular faith not only justifies but warrants not caring for those outside of it (and in historical terms, at least for Christians, that sense of God-ordained privilege has been used to warrant the slaughter, enslavement, and colonial oppression of those who are not "saved") that is not, at least for Jesus, an acceptable response, ever, to anyone, let alone anyone in need. The other is a Levite, a member of the Hebrew tribe of Levi, which says the same thing in relation to cultural or ethnic heritage, as in, you can't limit your love to those who are obviously a member of your clan. The use of the word "tribe" here is particularly relevant these days when cultural cohorts are breaking off into "tribal" groups that feel entitled to assert their dominance over "lesser" tribes—some of them defined by race or gender or sexual identity, some simply by a preferred grievance model—in whatever ways serve their immediate and selfish purposes. So, neither your preferred

religion nor your ethnic/cultural heritage exempts you from helping, i.e., loving, someone who is not "like you" in those respects.

Jesus intentionally uses a Samaritan, considered outcasts by the Jews of his time, incapable of compassion, not fully human (analogous to how Palestinians are cast these days) as his hero here. I could work out a more detailed takeaway from the responses of this gallery of passersby to the emergency right in front of them. But it seems so obvious to me that only someone as dense as J.D. Vance can possibly misread it. And I know from experience that trying to change minds like that is pointless. So I'll leave the rest of this hermeneutic work up to you. One of the things you'll have to actually think through and decide, of course, is where to draw lines, if any, as to who your "neighbor" is. Vance makes that clear. For him, neighbors are a tiny intermediate group between your family and your community, more like a neighborhood in a small town, maybe, the people who occupy the houses you can see, at least if they look like you. That is exactly the definition of "neighbor" Jesus finds morally reprehensible. He says specifically in Matthew 5:43-48:

> *You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

He says much the same thing in Luke 6:27-28:

*But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.*

So, love your enemies, those who persecute you, those who curse you, and those who hate you. And Jesus gets even more specific when it comes to situations like that man not on your side of the road. In Matthew 25:40-1, for example, in this scene at the last judgment:

*Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."*

*Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"*

*The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."*

So, if you want to join those "on his right," the path is pretty clear. Jesus says essentially this over and over in the gospels. And he does it, himself. If that is the ethic of love that animates your social and political agenda, raise your hand. Right, thought so. Not so easy, is it. There is no boundary line in Jesus' definition of neighbor for differentiating one "other" from another. They're all

in. That's what he says. Sorry, J.D. and your bros. Like Leo said: Wrong!

As to that *ordo amoris*: Jesus is quite explicit about how we are to love God: all in. And he's quite explicit about our neighbors who deserve our love: all of them. The pivot-point in this love triangle that connects love of God to love of others is love of self. To the best of my knowledge Jesus never explains in detail what that is and how to do it, at least not in the canonical gospels. He, like most of us, seems to assume that self-love is built into the human package, a given, self-evident, everyone knows what it is, what it feels like. So extending it to others is merely a process of behavioral analogy: I would like or not like to be treated this way, so "they" will, too. I think it's more complicated than that, that the key here is understanding at a deep level how and why you love yourself, I mean personally. Or don't. And changing that if you find it superficial or unsatisfactory, the logic being that if you don't truly love, or in fact hate, yourself, whatever you translate over to your neighbor will not be love at all, even if you delude yourself into believing it is.

So: What do you mean when *you* say to yourself "I love myself?" Most of us want to believe we're already pretty great in that respect, or at least quite satisfactory. But when (if ever) we're being totally honest, most of us "hate" ourselves in certain ways. Some of these are obvious, the ways in which we feel or fear we don't measure up to cultural standards of "perfection," and have been repeatedly reminded of it along the way. Those are the easy ones to work on. But most of them, I think, are too deep for us even to be aware of, in that we have covered them over with fancy bric-a-brac or had them buried in us away from our conscious understanding by the dominant values of our culture or religion or family before we even learned to talk let alone think. These are the hard ones to extricate. It's kind of scary just scratching the surface, knowing there's way more down there. And they need to be attended to. Why? Because if you hate

yourself in those ways, you will hate your neighbor in those ways. Simple as that.

So how to do that? A way to get started is to think more deeply about your preferred (or unconsciously adopted) way of thinking about what your "self" is. One self-equivalent concept rooted deeply in the Western psyche is the I-am, vexed from the outset. I work all of this out in more detail in a chapter called "I-dentity" in *Living Hidden*. Here is a quick sketch: When God first introduces himself to Moses, he says simply that his name is "I am." Moses kind of pesters him to be more specific, like to give a last name, too. God relents and says his full name is "I am who am." So right off the bat, there is an implicit dualism in the singularity of the I-am, one that can resolve two-into-one (if you're godly) or devolve one-into-two (if you're not.)

You can see something similar in the Hellenistic tradition. Heraclitus, for example, says "mind" (his I-am equivalent) "strains against itself . . . as does the arm to string the bow or lyre." Again, a one that is straining against itself as if it's two. A couple of millennia later, Descartes' famous "I think therefore I am" served as an anchor for Enlightenment dualisms, especially the matter/spirit divide. But the expression itself is not (to my way of reading) saying my body and mind are incommensurable. It's saying (via that "therefore") that the mind is divided against itself, a thinker that is distinct from the I-am-ness it points to, a heritage that informs Western philosophy (and psychology as well as the "classical paradigm" in physics I've been writing about) to this day.

On the creative side, S.T. Coleridge's famous definition of the imagination, the keystone for Romantic poetics, is similarly afflicted. He says: "The primary Imagination I hold to be 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." Which simply translates into "human Perception"

the same tension embedded in God's name. Except we are "finite," therefore incapable of resolving it into a singularity. On the American side, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman repeatedly vex the matter of identity via interactions and conflicts between what they call a "me" and a "myself," which are not the same. In the 20th century Mikhail Bakhtin argues that "[T]he genuine life of the personality takes place at the point of non-coincidence between a [wo]man and [her]self." I could go on and on, but you get my point: What every one of these definitions implies is a doubleness, an I and another I (or some equivalent) that knows or expresses or counters it.

Eastern wisdom traditions, some of which I've written about in these posts, are quite adept at resolving this dualism into a transcendent singularity. Western systems are not. In their context, I personally believe that for this equation to work as Jesus poses it, it needs a third party, a self that is "other" than these two I-ams, one that both belongs to the self and is experienced as not-self, i.e., as other, a you-that-is-not-I. This, then, becomes the vehicle for translating self-love to neighbors. That sounds complicated but it's not really. We all know what it feels like to have a component of our identity, a you, that is not-I. We talk to and about ourselves in those terms all the time. There are two ways we can respond to that voice: assume it is inimical, abnormal, dangerous, and keep it shut in, or assume it is amicable, normal, benign, and follow it out. Since poetry is my *metier,* I'm going to work this difference out via that genre.

I'll start with a negative example first, using T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land.* In the poem's final section, "The Thunder Speaks," Eliot references the *Brihadaranyak Upanishad,* where the repeated sound of the thunder's "Da, Da, Da" is heard as three different words, the second of which is:

> *Dayadvham: I have heard the key*
> *Turn in the door once and turn once only*

*We think of the key, each in his prison*
*Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison*

The Sanskrit word Dayadhvam can be loosely translated as "sympathy," one of the three virtues—give (Datta) and control (Damyata) are the other two—the thunder seeks to teach. In one of his (in)famous footnotes for the poem, commenting on this passage, Eliot offers two "allusions" to clarify what it means to him and for his vision of the degraded world around him. One is from F. H. Bradley's (a late 19th century ultra-idealist philosopher) *Appearance and Reality* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1893, p. 346):

> *My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or my feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it. . . . In brief, regarded as an existence which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul.*

The other is from Dante's *Inferno*, which translates to "And then I heard them nailing shut the door/ into that fearful tower." Yikes! This is a pretty extreme way to exile the potentially redemptive "you" or "other" from the scene. Entirely. What's left behind is your "opaque" "sphere" in permanent seclusion. Solipsism writ large. No neighbors at all.

I'll use Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" as the counterpoint. The poem opens this way:

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

There is a dualistic identity here—the myself and the I who celebrates and sings it, in seeming harmony with one another. But there is also that very provocative "you" in the middle. What is it doing there? During my first reading of that poem in high school I found that second line off-putting, offensive even: as in "Who are you to do my assuming for me?" Only later, in graduate school, did I realize Whitman was using the word "assume" in an entirely different sense, as in "What I take into 'myself' I will offer back to you. You can take it or leave it, but it's all here, free, right now." In other words, it is a gesture of amicable love to all of his readers, comprised in that "you," each of whom, in his opinion, literally shares all of his atoms! Again, yikes, in the opposite direction, in that it allows him to reach out in the most amicable and loving way to every other "you" out there as if they all inhabit the same body, which is his, too! As you read the rest of Whitman's poem it becomes clear that this "you" includes not only his "enemies" and those who "hate," "curse" and "mistreat" him—he says that expressly—but everything in the universe, from the tiniest mote to the swirling galaxies. He accomplishes what Jesus mandates not via I-assertion, but via you-not-I-assertion. That "you," in him, as "other," becomes the point of contact to all "others" out there, and the poem is full of them, all lovingly rendered. Later in the poem Whitman declares he "contain[s] multitudes," expanding the range of his otherness exponentially, implying that our identity ultimately comprises vast stores of "I's" and "you's" all seeking to collaborate in some amicable, sometimes even choral way to achieve communion.

Virginia Woolf renders a similar internal cacophony playfully in her novel about the gender-bending adventures of a wo(man) named Orlando:

> *. . . 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. Orlando was certainly seeking this self as the reader can judge from overhearing her talk as she drove . . . (308-10)*

This community of others "in here" reflects the raucous diversity of the community of others "out there." Unfortunately, the "uppermost" among them, which "wishes to be nothing but one self," and has the "power" to enforce that mandate, keeps the rest of them "locked up," precisely (I believe) to prevent them from performing the sort of outward-facing love Jesus mandates: the unity we all, as humans, share via our inner otherness, becoming companionable precisely because we are, in our own identities, always also other to ourselves, the intimate and loving link between "yourself" and your neighbors, who are every "other" human being, no matter whether they are in your religious or ethnic tribe, a love capable of extending even to the whole of the universe, your "you-ness" shared on a truly godly scale.

Our current obsession with tribal differences, which leads to so many kinds of misunderstanding, conflict, and, sooner or later, violence is ample evidence of that. Organized religion is a good historical example. All the major Western religions—Hebrew, Christian, Muslim—revere essentially the same God. And they often kill one another, at times on a grand scale, in that very God's name. Even the various Christian sects, all of which share in common exactly the same God and God-given instruction book, the Bible, as nearly identical as you can get, are routinely at war with one another (sometimes literally) over trivial differences, a Cain vs. Abel dystopia. That is not love. It is hate, and it has the converse effect from the one I described above: If you hate others in these ways, you will inevitably learn to hate yourself more, or at least feed the hate already in there, the one that creates these bigotries to begin with. How they are allowed to masquerade as love, well, that gets me back to the problem at hand: You can always hide what you don't want anyone, including yourself, to see under some eyeliner, as J.D. Vance does, if you want to.

It is hard to love others as we love ourselves, as Jesus mandated, when we actually hate ourselves in these ways and deny it, such large numbers of our selves whose hate we haven't excised or at least tried to corral in some way. It takes work to find the main culprits. Lots of it. If you don't think so, you haven't tried. What I now know is that there will be no durable beloved community on the outside, among others, unless and until I can create a durable beloved community within myself, a culture where at least most of my many selves are collaborating, in love, toward the good. Then, there is the possibility for beloved community—a universal neighborhood—everywhere.

Every historical argument for hate, slavery, and any other mode of categorical oppression depends for its efficacy on this foundational distinction: I am fully human, worthy of love; you are not. Many of those arguments warrant that paradigm under

God, who, they say, parcels out love similarly, thereby justifying the many forms of bigotry they validate in His name. But if there is an "other" than our self, a you, right in there in our own inner midst, one who shares that quality of otherness with everyone else out there, then self-love can be much more easily achieved, transferred and broadly shared. Those forms of cultural violence may not disappear, but at least it becomes much harder to deploy God, or some perversion of Jesus' words, to explain and justify it, as Christians have done for centuries and are doing now.

I've known many thousands of Christians in my life. I think I could count on one hand the number I felt were actually doing what Jesus clearly mandates. And I'm not among them. I aspire to be, have spent a lifetime working on it and will keep doing so. If I live long enough, I may get closer. If Mike Johnson and John Thune live forever, they never, ever will, because they think they're already there and they haven't even started. Hate to tell you, guys, you're still stuck on level one with J.D. Vance: Wrong!

. . .

Virginia Woolf passage from *Orlando: A Biography*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1928.

**June 19: In the spirit . . . of saving Schrödinger's cat**

*Entanglement is not one but rather the characteristic trait of quantum mechanics, the one that enforces its entire departure from classical lines of thought.*

Erwin Schrödinger

Schrödinger's cat is an (in)famous thought experiment in quantum mechanics that illustrates the concept of superposition. It involves a cat in a box with a device that has a significant probabilistic chance of killing it. Until the box is opened and the cat is observed, it is considered to be in a superposition of both alive and dead states. I won't be writing about it here—too complicated—though I do talk about superposition below. If you want the whole story, just Google it. Quantum mechanics is full of weird things like this, interesting up to a point. I remember back in the '90s when I found some program that could make my computer speak what I typed, in that weird, mechanical Star-Warsy type voice computers had back then. I demonstrated it to my daughter, who was about 7 or 8, and asked her to have the computer say something to her about itself and its new "voice." I typed it as she said it: "It's cool and it's outrageous and guess what I'm a little stupid," perhaps a moment of self-revelation for the computer on what has turned out so far to be a failed journey on its multigenerational path toward potential enlightenment. My daughter's reaction that day is a good example itself of superposition: both impressed and unimpressed. I remember it to this day because it's an applicable "motto" for so many things that happen in life. Schrodinger's cat is one of those things. Quite often so am I.

In any case, this is the second post in my series on quantum mechanics. As I explained in the first, this is not an attempt to explain quantum mechanics *per se*. It is a thought experiment that explores how a personal/behavioral ethics founded on the principles of quantum mechanics would differ from one based on "classical lines of thought," still the bulwark of most Western ethical/spiritual ideologies. Much of this material is excerpted and revised from my book *Willing Spirit*, a project I started last winter when it struck me how similar in its inner dynamics the "quantum paradigm" was to so many of the ancient wisdom traditions I've been immersing myself in for many years, if you extrapolated its ethical implications, I mean. I frame my analysis there via a series of paired (as contrasts, not binaries) concepts, one pertinent to classical mechanics, the other to quantum mechanics. Those pairs are: stability/emergence (covered last time), outside/inside and deterministic/probabilistic (today's topics), certitude/uncertainty and vacuum/field (for next time), and, in the final post, the keystone difference Schrödinger highlights in my epigraph: entangled, paired with isolated. So:

**Outside/inside:**

In the classical paradigm, the observer and the observed are incommensurable, having evolved, or been created, separately. The former is an idealized platform positioned outside the latter which it is empowered to calculate, measure, define and use to serve its own purposes. In a quantum paradigm, the observer is integral with the observed, having evolved in concert with it. Any act of measurement is mutual, often in quite mysterious ways. What we can know of reality emerges from this collaborative relationship. In such a model the universe is innately biophilic, built from the ground up to create and support the life forms that become conscious of it.

This new way of thinking invites me to accord to all other "beings" in the world—humans, trees, rocks, stars, etc.—the same

respect I accord to myself and my kind. Which implies, at least to me, that our communicative relations with and among these "other" things is more like dialogue than dictation, a mutuality of presence, communion, even. From such a vantage point, certain behavioral changes seem imperative, including honoring that sense of oneness I alluded to in my previous post, an implicit attitude of equality, equity, equanimity, like DEI on steroids! Object Oriented Ontology proffers one secular philosophical framework for thinking about "things" in this way. Most Indigenous cultures operate in a similar framework with a strong spiritual underpinning: their reverence for all of nature. Both are compatible with, though not derivative from, the quantum paradigm, as are many wisdom traditions, some of which I index below.

I think you can work out for yourself some of the more obvious implications of this shift for how we think about and use the "resources" the universe proffers, in relation to global warming and sustainability, e.g. A somewhat less obvious one pertains to another pair of contrasting concepts: hubris and humility. The classical paradigm, intrinsically hierarchical, promotes hubris, human domination. The quantum paradigm promotes humility, conceptualized not as subservience to a higher authority but as a "willing-ness" (thus the title of my book) to stand openly on an equal footing with everything one encounters.

The outside/inside coequality in the quantum paradigm applies as well to consciousness, which I, along with at least some others, argue is not exceptional to humans or a few "intelligent" mammals, but is (at least potentially) universal. Nor is it distinct and separable from embodiment. One cornerstone of the classical paradigm (and the American psyche) this makes untenable is the individuated, autonomous self, the "I-am" writ large, that sort of thing. There are any number of wisdom texts and traditions that offer alternative ways of thinking about the self and self-transcendence.

My go-to source for such "thinking" in the Western tradition (as I'm sure you've already guessed) is the "lost" Gospel of Thomas. In this early Christian text Jesus shares his secret teachings with the apostles, little vignettes that Thomas records. One of the things that Jesus says repeatedly is that the kingdom of heaven is not a futural event on another plane but God's presence in the world right here and now. And the only way to enter this kingdom is via self-knowledge, not externally imposed orthodoxies mediated by priests. Which is probably why this gospel didn't make the cut for the canonical Bible in the 4th century, autocracy the theme of the day back then, as it is now. This kingdom is, further, both "in here" *and* "out there." Here is one of Jesus' many sayings pertinent to this experience of using self-knowledge to promote a superpositional state of self-transcendence:

> *Jesus said, "If your leaders say to you, 'Look, 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 within you and it is outside you."*

There are, he says repeatedly, no radical distinctions between the "within" (spirit in the parlance of my book) and the "outside" (the material universe in the classical paradigm.) Once such boundaries are dissolved "the kingdom" is right here, right now. All you need to do is wake up to it, the sort of sudden revelation Laozi describes over and over as the defining feature of Daoist enlightenment. This state of mind requires two kinds of awareness: One is the "mirror mind" of the *Daodejing*, everything "out there" reflected as it is. The other is an ongoing mindfulness "in here" that aspires to "make the two one," West and East sharing a rare moment of consonance.

Hinduism seeks to resolve this inside-outside conundrum via the merger of various modes of "self." In the *Upanishads*, for example, several words get translated into English as "self,"

seemingly interchangeably, initially confusingly, to name individual identity, the animate universe, and god. In the original Sanskrit there is a distinction among them. To wit: the personal self (Atman), the underlying field for all perception, thinking and knowing, as well as for consciousness itself, shares its essence with the universal self (Brahman), the unknowable before-anything essence that suffuses the universe, providing the ground for a creator god (Brahma) to come into being as a mediator. Transcendence is the experience of the commonalty among all three. In some ways the incapacity of English to make those distinctions verbally is a more accurate representation of the experience of a self-transcendent self, disabling language as a way to code it.

For Buddhists it is through the no-self rather than the manifold self that this deep sense of awareness of the interdependence of all things emerges, via what is called "dependent co-arising," which presumes that everything is interdependent—nothing growing or changing in isolation. Self in its mode as a unique personal identity and its primary instrument, language, are, once again, deemed illusory impediments that need to be overridden on the path to enlightenment.

In all of these systems, inside and outside, self and other, are not either/or as in the classical paradigm but both/and as in the quantum paradigm. In other words, they are superpositional. And transcendence, by whatever means one might pursue it, is neither esoteric nor disembodied but available to anyone right here, right now. It may seem a stretch to extend this blurriness into the discourse of physics. But reality at the quantum level is in fact similarly blurry (see below). In addition, quantum field theory posits a universe in which many different fields collaborate perfectly to synthesize "reality," including us, wholistically, a potential pathway to cosmic unification. And, while the complexity of the universe and the lack of a quantum theory of gravity make it impossible right now, in theory the whole of the

universe may someday be expressible in a single wavefunction equation, mathematics itself becoming a medium for meditation. As the Hindu Rigveda says: “reality is one: the wise speak about it in many ways,” which is my general point here. And, following the imperative of the quantum paradigm, my preferred way of thinking about ideologies—always seeking common ground among seemingly competing -isms, including quantum mechanic-ism, which is what led to this “quantum ethics” thought experiment in the first place.

**Deterministic/Probabilistic:**

The classical paradigm posits a universe whose laws are clear and distinct, discoverable and knowable, universal and predictable in their effects, every time, everyplace. Measure or time one event accurately and you have a template applicable to all equivalent events. In other words, the system is deterministic, a keynote for all the foundational thinkers that ushered in the classical paradigm. Newton’s mechanics is a good example: His physical universe is essentially a clockwork mechanism predictable in its movements forward or back if you start with enough of the right information. Most of the philosophers of his era generally accepted that way of construing the “laws” of nature. They did strive to leave some room for what they called “free will” in human affairs, but even that had a quasi-deterministic aspect. Kant is representative here. He agrees with Newton, with a few notable exceptions, about how the natural universe operates. The moral universe is somewhat more nuanced. His concept of the “categorical imperative” for example accords a considerable degree of conscious discretion to human behavior. But it also assumes a universal standard to which human beings should aspire, each considered act in effect establishing a law which then serves as a template for subsequent acts, a sort of generalized “Golden Rule,” exemplifying the “soft determinism” almost all the philosophers of the era shared, Spinoza an obvious outlier. If you translate all of that into behavioral terms, certitude, while not

guaranteed, is at least aspirational, assuming you have enough of the right information about the base state. And most often it is regulated by an elite cadre of authorities—scientists, priests, politicians, etc.—who mediate "truth" to the masses.

The quantum paradigm posits a universe whose pre-observational behaviors at the foundational (subatomic) level are anything but fully predictable or knowable. They are uncertain in a very specific sense formalized into quantum mechanics by Werner Heisenberg via his famous "uncertainty principle," which basically says you can't measure any two complementary properties of a quantum system (position/momentum or spin direction, say) with complete accuracy simultaneously, which you can without any difficulty in classical mechanics. The more precisely you measure one, Heisenberg demonstrates, the less precisely you know the other.

Further, effects at the quantum level are expressed as probabilities, not predictable or repeatable certainties. The term that captures this aspect of reality best is, as I said, superposition, which basically describes the natural (pre-observed) states of fundamental particles as having many possible expressions extended across their "wave functions," which regulate the probability of any one of them showing up under observation. Basically, this means that the non-observed state of the subatomic system is fuzzy, indeterminate, rife with possibilities that remain in wholistic suspension until faced with a specific question, what physicists call "measurement." The structure of that question will determine which one of the available answers will most likely materialize. There are fascinating ongoing conversations about whether observers are best considered inside or outside the quantum field at the moment of measurement, giving rise to what is called "the measurement problem" (a trivial matter in the classical paradigm) that afflicts to this day anyone who wants to think in depth about, or measure, quantum systems.

One of my favorite expressions for capturing this probabilistic aspect of quantum states was coined by Philip Ball: At the quantum level, he says, it is not a matter of "what is, but what if." Which is to say that quantum wave functions in their unobserved state exist in various modes of superpositionality. Acts of measurement force these wave functions to express one of the available options, an outcome explained (quite differently) by a plethora of still-competing theories: objective collapse, hidden variables, many worlds, et al. The probabilities for how those various outcomes will range across their spectrum of possibilities can be specified. But certainty is not possible beforehand. As best I can tell, no one yet understands why both "reality" and the ways we measure it are orchestrated this way. They just are.

This is, obviously, a radical departure from the way the classical paradigm represents and measures things and their interactions at the macro level. One of the mental disciplines I've been trying to inculcate on its basis is to resist the temptation to believe I see or know "what is" and keep my attention in that suspended state of "what if," something like what Coleridge calls a "willing [to echo my book's title] suspension of disbelief," which quantum systems not only invite but require, or what Keats calls "negative capability," the ability to accept "uncertainties, mysteries doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason." You can also see the analogy with Bakhtin's concept of "unfinalizability," which I explained in my first "quantum paradigm" post. This is not to say that you can't act or decide, nor does it exile truth from the field of play, the fatal flaw in so many now culturally embedded misreadings of postmodernist ideologies, only that acts and decisions must be provisional, open to re-negotiation as conditions change, truth aspirational rather than one-and-done, eternally codified. Consequently (and perhaps most importantly from an ethical point of view) *tolerance* (which is an obvious derivative from the uncertainty principle) is a quality built into reality from the ground up, one we should emulate not override to serve our "self"-ish purposes. In other words, be kind, whether the

cat is locked in a “stupid” box (which the classical paradigm is so good at constructing for all of us to live/die in) or wandering around in front of you on its own path toward enlightenment.

**June 24: In the Spirit … of angels of the morning**

If you're my age you probably remember Merilee Rush's great voice. I just found out she grew up in Seattle, a bit north of me here, and, apparently, still lives there. "Neat," as we used to say in our now-distant heyday. Back in 1968 I went out on an amazing date with a young woman whose personal anthem was Rush's just-released mega-hit "Angel of the Morning." She was as thrilling to me as that song. I wasn't to her, unfortunately. So this post will have nothing to do with any of that. I will though set it generally, at the outset, in that turbulent time. And I will get to some morning angels, promise.

Trying to find a professional identity when you're young, late teens, early 20s, can be a murky, hit and miss process, especially in culture like ours was back in my day, which did so little to prepare you for that. Or at least it was for me, with so many genuine interests and very weak practical instincts. As I said in a previous post, I started out in physics, most likely would have stayed there in an historical moment less, well, hysterical than the late-60s. There were some autobiographical reasons that led me to abandon that track. One significant *cultural* reason was the war machine mentality of that moment. I was involved in my share of political activity at the time. When I imagined a professional future in my chosen field I feared my main options might be serving that war machine in some way, directly or indirectly. I found that prospect quite disagreeable.

One of the things I loved, and miss, about the cauldron of that era was the way it didn't just invite, it compelled one to make moral choices, and, sometimes, to put morality above personal safety, legal jeopardy, and in this case long term economic security. For someone like me, given my class background and the absence of any financial resources, choosing poetry over science was, well, at least imprudent. But, and this is the honest-to-god truth, I really

didn't care. First of all, it was hard to imagine an extended future if you were draft eligible during the Vietnam war. And then there was the Mutual-Assured-Destruction approach to global diplomacy, Armageddon always right around the corner. The activities I was engaged in had, on occasion, an intensity to them that was as much a "rush" to me as that date. I did them because I cared about life, which makes perfect sense in historical moments like that one, and, if you're paying attention, like the one we're in right now. Poetry seemed full of life to me. So I picked it.

I was, fortunately, smart enough to realize that my talent and output capacity would make it highly unlikely for me to make a living with it. I came to understand the limits of the former by reading voraciously all the "great" poets I could find. I could tell my "gift" was not in their league. Which isn't necessarily disqualifying, I also knew, because, in my work as a reviewer of contemporary poets, I could see that most of the successful ones out there weren't in that league, either. The keys for them were, as best I could tell, output, connections, and luck. I had no connections. So, to avoid relying entirely on luck, I focused on output. My output as a poet was, I knew from experience, about 10 pages of worthy work a year. In 1971-72 I committed myself to a test of my ultimate potential. Every morning without fail I sat down and wrote poetry for an hour or two. Over the course of the year I produced piles and piles of pages. At the end of the year, I went through it all to see how much of it was "good." It was about 10 pages, exactly what I would have ended up if I had just written when I was "in the spirit," as I always had. That's when I decided to become a teacher, the best decision I ever made. And to make "poet" simply an "also/plus" item on my CV.

I say all of this because a dear friend who has known me forever—we were hired simultaneously as composition/rhetoric specialists in the same department back in 1981, worked and often team-taught and co-wrote together for the next 30-some years—after reading my "in the dark" post, hearkened back to a poetry

reading I gave not long after I was hired. There were two of us teaching in our program who were "also/plus" poets, and the chair, as a way to highlight that, scheduled an in-house reading for us. I had done coffee-house type readings before, but this one was different in potential consequence, an audience not necessarily of poetry lovers but of colleagues I'd have to work with going forward. I chose brand-new poems to read, none of which I had even sent out, let alone published, always risky. I opened my portion of the reading with a series of poems called "Morning Songs," five of them, which I had just finished.

In the email my friend wrote me after reading my "in the dark" post she said:

> *It has been some time since we were last in touch. And yet it has not. Across silences, in spite of unplanned protracted silences, when I read your writing again I pick up where we left or even where we had been long before. For some reason, your poems post made your windowsill poems "flash up in my mind." There was some darkness there too, but lighter, muted by a touch of humor. This is to acknowledge that I have sensed the presence of that darkness in you long before, after Carol died, you so intensely, inexhaustedly, transformed it into your spiritual and "mysterious" mode of being. You have made Darkness your Muse. . . . I would love to revisit your windowsill poems.*

The fact that a reading 40-some years ago could still flash up in her mind, and that she could fathom the ways in which those more playful poems were also dark was quite moving to me. So, for her, and for you if you're interested, I'm simply going to proffer those poems here, (you'll find on my website an audio file of me reading them right now, in the voice of a *somewhat* older man who still loves to wander into those spaces where the light and the dark commingle.) I think you'll understand why she remembers

them as my “windowsill” poems when you read/hear the first and last ones. The poems all follow the same narrative format, as they actually happened: I wake up, something mysterious happens, I comment on it, then head to work as it all dissipates. A divorce and my new job, along with some other stressful things, had left my inner life in considerable disarray. I was grateful for all the magical things, including some small angels, that came to visit me on those mornings.

***Morning Song 1***

*This morning*
*many small angels gathered*
*on my window as if*
*they might stay*
*all day to pray or*
*picnic there, happily*
*for no reason in particular.*

*When they moved their luminous*
*heads, splinters of daylight streaked*
*all across my room.*
*After a while they filed*
*quietly upward and*
*out of my sight.*

*I leaned back more solidly*
*in my chair and smiled, thinking:*
*they have nothing*
*whatever to do with*
*the day I am*
*about to waste now.*

*On my way to work a passerby*
*glanced at me a second*
*time thinking: that man*
*must have seen angels on*
*his window this morning,*
*while I slept.*

***Morning Song 2***

*This morning*
*a herd of elephants*
*stampeded through the trees.*
*For no particular reason except*
*it is November now*
*and there is nothing*
*left to wait for.*

*I dressed hurriedly*
*and stepped out into*
*the thick, gray*
*flesh of Thursday, thinking:*
*sometimes it is hard*
*to know what*
*to love*
*and when.*

*Then I remembered*
*the elephants who love*
*everything even*
*Thursday and November*
*and I skipped my way to work*
*through the beautiful*
*wreckage of leaves.*

***Morning Song 3***

*This morning*
*I woke to*
*a roomful of azaleas,*
*thousands of them, clouds*
*of flowers blooming ferociously,*
*more gorgeous than I*
*could ever hope to afford,*
*enough lush color to crowd out*
*even my loudest dreams.*

*I lolled for a while*
*in a haze of fragrances too*
*hothouse sweet to breathe.*
*Then I hacked my way*
*to the stairs thinking:*
*sometimes you cannot trust*
*anything to be*
*only reasonably beautiful.*

*On my way to work I saw nothing*
*except the fog of my hot*
*breath catching itself like*
*cotton on the frost-*
*sharp air and I thought*
*of all I had meant*
*to say that day about*
*my being beautiful*
*and wouldn't now because of*
*those damn azaleas*

***Morning Song 4***

*This morning*
*all the bluebirds I ever knew*
*(and that's a lot of them)*
*stopped by my place just*
*to sit around and sing.*

*I couldn't figure it.*
*I was no place they should be.*
*But they were there. Not just*
*like I remembered it.*
*Like for real.*

*Pretty soon it was "blue"*
*this and "blue" that and*
*"blue" them and "blue" me*
*until there were more*
*blues in that room than*
*all the music I knew.*
*Or than the sky.*

*I rocked back and forth*
*in my chair thinking:*
*they say the Eastern Bluebird*
*is nearly extinct, and most of*
*this month I believed it.*
*Now I have to wonder.*

*On my way to work*
*their cheerful, delicate voices*
*diminished as I walked*
*till all I heard was traffic*
*or the wind, which seemed*
*to want to wonder*
*how any day could start*
*so blue and come so soon*
*to this.*

***Morning Song 5***

*This morning*
*many made-up minds climbed*
*in over the windowsill*
*back from wherever*
*sane as the light of day*
*meaning what they meant.*

*I had to laugh.*
*They just sat around*
*in a small circle and talked*
*quietly*
*for a long time*
*mostly about "life:" how*
*this one for example happened*
*at the moment to be mine.*

*I did not "think"*
*anything all day.*
*I did not need to.*
*I did not go to work.*
*I just sat there*
*and listened*
*quietly*
*for a long time*
*to the sound of many minds*
*saying something*
*singly,*
*like mine.*

## June 30: In the Spirit … of uncertainty

When I Googled "images of Donald Trump and Jesus" there were dozens of them, one more absurd than the next. When I Googled "images of JFK and Jesus" there was one: a scene from a home in Dublin with two pictures over a fireplace, one of Jesus, one of the Kennedys. I've been trying to download it to compare with a breathtakingly blasphemous one of Trump seated beside Jesus in a courtroom, but it keeps disappearing. Probably copyrighted. Or maybe Jack, Jackie and Jesus would rather chat in that charming room in Dublin than sit in a courtroom with the Dour Don. My point was to highlight how far the constitutionally mandated church/state "separation" has migrated just in my lifetime. I'll leave you to think about that while I get on with what I want to write about today in this third installment of my series on a quantum-mechanics-based-ethics.

I was in the 7th grade when the Cuban missile crisis occurred. I remember coming home from school one afternoon. The TV was on, a rarity at that time of day. I walked into the living room and watched what I assumed was real-time video of American ships heading out to intercept Russian ships with missiles aboard. I had a felt sense that the world, or at least the human world I was a part of, might be incinerated, maybe that night, the next day, soon. At school we did those inane drills of hiding under desks. At home we inanely stored water and some food in the basement. We lived a hundred miles from New York City. Even a middle schooler knew any "prepping" we might do was futile. I remember dreaming quite often that I was standing at our basement window watching the mushroom clouds rising up in the distance, Armageddon headed my way. They were mesmerizing. The end of the world almost beautiful.

One of the things I appreciated about the Irish Catholic culture I grew up with in the 1950s was its deft and sometimes humorous

way of managing the balance between the obligatory and the possible, between truth and mystery, the dark and the light, life and death. It was richly and deeply human, the remnants of its magical Celtic origins somehow having survived through millennia of Romanization. JFK was the first Catholic president, Irish, a point of great pride for my mother and the local Irish community. I trusted him implicitly, the last president in my lifetime I can say that about. The Church I knew back then prepared me well for that moment and for a world where certitude and uncertainty, today's themes, are always in superposition, so unlike the strident ideological absolutism that animates the many Catholics Donald Trump has recruited to implement and enforce his MAGA agenda. They came of age during the 90s, when the Catholic church was monocultural, the only real issue abortion: good vs. evil, saved vs. damned, us vs. them, no gray, no humor, none. Only certitude. I returned to the church right around then after a long lapse, an almost obligatory stage for an Irish Catholic of my generation, hoping to find what I remembered of it. It was gone. I mean entirely. I re-lapsed for good shortly thereafter. Compare how the Supreme Court Catholics have recently ruled pertinent to any number of previously settled matters of cultural tolerance with what Jesus actually said, which I happen to know something about, and you can see why. And you can also see why I find the MAGA propaganda pairing Trump with Jesus sacrilegious, a word that, if you look closely at the spelling, is not related to the word "religion," but whose roots mean "to steal the sacred," a perfect descriptor for an inveterate grifter.

This thread on my page was inspired by Erwin Schrödinger's claim that "entanglement is not one but rather *the* characteristic trait of quantum mechanics, *the one that enforces its entire departure from classical lines of thought" (italics mine).* Since, in my view, "classical (i.e., post-Enlightenment) lines of thought" (mis)inform not only our preconceptions about the physical universe but also our underlying assumptions about the moral universe, quantum mechanics "enforces" a "departure" from those as well. I work out

what I see as some of the primary ethical/behavioral implications of such a departure, from the classical toward a quantum paradigm, via pairs of terms, one indigenous to each domain. Today's pair is:

**Certitude/Uncertainty**

One of the central tenets of Newtonian mechanics and the classical paradigm is that calculative certitude is possible, at least in relation to the material universe, which is mechanistic, i.e., regulated by mathematically predictable laws of causality and temporal sequencing. The human universe is more resistant to certitude, but the classical paradigm includes certain elements and beliefs about truth that help to counter that. Some are vested in religious systems, each of which tends to operate on the presumption that what it proffers is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Some are vested in the scientific method itself. You can see this most evidently in the cultural obsession during the 19th and early 20th centuries with transforming traditionally "humanistic" provinces of knowledge into sciences. Psychology became an applied science late in the 19th century in Germany, a lineage that ran through Freud and reached its apogee (or nadir) with Skinner, or maybe with the current tech-bro obsession with eternalizing life (at least for certain elites) via various brands of transhumanism. Sociology rebranded as social science, focusing more on systems than communities. Economics, especially capitalism, had the same ambitions and worked mightily, via marginalism, for example, to assimilate mathematics and logic models into its theories.

Even my own field, English studies, had such aspirations, starting early in the 20th century with I.A. Richards who, along with a few of his British colleagues, founded what later came to be known (via a strange congeries of poets and critics at Vanderbilt University on this side of the pond) as the "New Criticism." This method of "close reading" presumed that a poetic text was a self-enclosed, self-referential universe of meaning, much the same

way the classical paradigm imagined the material universe. Richards and his colleagues generated all kinds of exotic terms for effecting the study of such objects. He attempted to do something similar with an ancient field called "rhetoric." In *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936), for example, Richards famously defined rhetoric as the "study of misunderstanding and its remedies," an approach animated by the belief that if we could only become more exacting in our use of language we might avoid confusion and approach certitude in our communications. He and C.K. Ogden had previously spent years working on what they called "Basic English," creating a dictionary abridged to 850 essential words organized together by a very limited set of syntactical rules, a sort of linguistic math. By this means, they believed all sorts of "misunderstandings," from daily arguments to cultural catastrophes (like WWII, which Richards could see looming up over the horizon) could be avoided. Their project aspired to do with language exactly what I and all those other voices I have been channeling along the way here say is, at best, counterproductive in relation to true "understanding." Didn't work, obviously

One of the central tenets of quantum mechanics, on the other hand, is uncertainty, formalized into a "principle" by Werner Heisenberg. Basically, what this means is that the more closely you measure one aspect of a quantum system, the more vaguely its counterpart becomes knowable. In other words, you can't have one *with* the other. This is not a function of limitations in our measuring devices. It is how reality operates at what is called the Planck scale, where current theories of physics begin to break down. Max Planck originated the idea that matter and energy came pre-packaged in discrete units called "quanta," the study of which is quantum mechanics**.** Matter and energy are not, then, smooth functions. They increase or decrease in steps, with a unit at the bottom end that is indivisible. And it requires the addition or subtraction of specific units of energy to precipitate those steps. What I want to reemphasize here is the basic fuzziness of reality

at the subatomic level, where entities are more like complex interacting wave fields than the particulated planetary systems I was taught they were in high school.

At the behavioral level the uncertainty principle animates both aspects of the willing-ness I write about in *Willing Spirit*: first, an attitude of openness to what's possible and the humility to accept the limits on what can be known; second, a determination to persist in the face of that uncertainty. It doesn't preclude some kinds of pretty precise knowledge about oneself, others, or the world at large. It merely suggests that absolute precision in one area means complete ignorance in another. I apply this principle now via my disinclination to adopt any particular -ism as an unquestioned orthodoxy. Even more so, it warns me not to become too attached or subservient to any authority or public figure. The current obsession with cults, from grievance cultures absent thinking to Donald Trump with Jesus riding shotgun, are good examples of those two kinds of misplaced certitude. An attitude of uncertainty on the inside promotes an attitude of tolerance on the outside. The presumption of certainty does just the opposite. The whole dynamic of othering that currently afflicts our society is founded on the belief that one can "know" who another person is (or is not) simply by noting what they look like, as in race and gender bigotry, where they (or their parents) came from, as in ethnic bigotry, or what their life experiences are, or were during their formation, as in identity bigotry.

One metaphor I find useful for getting at the difference between certainty and uncertainty in ethical matters is the "moral compass." One way of imagining such a device is as a closed system paired with a "field" that has been pre-established outside it, its magnetically matched needle transplanted inside, the way religious, political, and nationalistic ideologies are imposed on us unconsciously while we're young. Or, if we have lost our way, when we are older. The figure of the compass in this model always operates with certitude the same way a compass does:

bring it into the realm of a magnetic field, and it jerks instantly north. In my preferred way of thinking, the magnetic field is self-created quite consciously, on the basis of reflection, reading, and critical inquiry. The matching needle still always points north. The field, though, within which it operates is always evolving, under revision, sometimes even under erasure when changes of magnitude occur, as they did for me in the 1990s. That sort of uncertainty is not at all frightening. It is inspiring. The lesson to take is if you push for absolute certainty in relation to some aspect of the world, yourself, or others, there will be a complementary side of its reality that you will either never see or completely misunderstand out of absolute ignorance. That is the problem with cults, the currency of the moment: They fledge in misunderstandings and flourish in ignorance. Heisenberg's principle offers an antidote: uncertainty, the first step toward waking up, preferably in that living room in Dublin, a wry Irish-lapsed-Catholic smile lighting up your face.

**July 6: In the Spirit … of a branch that will not break**

The James Wright poem I wrote about a couple of weeks ago got me thinking in general about the poets of his generation, the ones who came of age in the 1950s, the death rattle of late-stage Modernism, the lunacy of the *I'll Take My Stand* manifesto by the Twelve Southerners in 1930, that first blast of what later came to be called The New Criticism, having gradually been ratcheted down into Wimsatt and Beardsley's oppressive *The Verbal Icon* in 1954. Tough time to come aboard as a "creative individual." A generation wired-way-tight. My title today alludes to the second of Wright's "Two Hangovers" poems, where, he says:

*A brilliant blue jay is springing up and down, up and down,*
*On a branch.*
*I laugh, as I see him abandon himself*
*To entire delight, for he knows as well as I do*
*That the branch will not break.*

Finding a branch that wouldn't break was not so easy for these poets. I know quite a lot about them, both existentially (as it was happening) and critically (mostly later.) One of my college professors was the editor of a review magazine called *Best Sellers*, which primarily served the library marketplace, offering guidance for acquisitions. In my junior year he asked me to serve as the poetry reviewer, which I did for several years, maybe 25 reviews in all, including at least one book by each of the authors I'll mention here, except for James Wright whose breakthrough book *The Branch Will Not Break (1963),* taking its title from the poem above, came out a bit too early for me. Nothing I had done beforehand, or maybe ever since, has done more to enhance my critical acumen. There is something exciting, and a bit unnerving, about sitting down with a book no one else has read or evaluated yet. You have to do three things well: Explain as best you can the

poet's vision or project; show how she enacts it, with examples, for any other poet who might want to try it; and assess the quality of the book for an audience of readers who don't have the time to read everything and may rarely read poetry. All in 600 words or so. I loved that genre, suited me to a T. You're essentially on your own—except of course for all the other books you've read, what T.S. Eliot called "the Tradition" swirling around in the back of your head, templates that have, ideally, honed your intuition to recognize what is "great," which is a lot of what survives historically and hard to pick out in the morass of the current marketplace. Anything that doesn't tick that box may still be well worth reading, but you have to locate it on a qualitative spectrum.

In any case, these were the "contemporary" poets I cut my teeth on in the 60s and early 70s, the ones I read to get a sense of what it might mean, and take, to become a practicing poet, which was, among other prospects, on my radar. Many of them came to tragic or untimely ends during the decade or so that spanned my apprenticeship. Critics who knew them personally, like A. Alvarez, whom I'll mention below, tended to view all of this with alarm, as if a devotion to poetry was a downhill slalom to self-destruction and death. That was not my takeaway at all. Poetry, I concluded after careful consideration, was not what destroyed these good people. It's what kept them afloat, resisting as long as they could the *cultural* torrents that *were* on that self-destruction-and-death-slalom, an historical moment much like the one we're in right now. So, my advice: If you want to maintain a modicum of mental wellness in the midst of the current lunacy, read or write some poems. Apply twice daily for two weeks. If your condition doesn't improve, consult your physician. At least that's what my eczema cream says.

These poets had a rough go of it in part I believe because of the whiplash effect of moving from what Robert Lowell called the "tranquilized Fifties" to the psycho-delic 60s. What happens to a weather balloon (which is what poets are in a sense, taking

accurate measurements of what's "in the air") as it moves from the tight fist of the troposphere into the loosey-goosey stratosphere? It comes apart at the seams. And that is what I believe happened with this generation of poets. It's hard, I know from experience, to come along when the dominant paradigm of the previous two generations is in tatters, revealing itself as flaccid and stupid, and the new one hasn't fledged fully enough to take wing. It's much harder I think to have been indoctrinated into a taken-for-granted cultural matrix and then have it dismantled right before your eyes just as you're getting good with it.

The effect of this decompression was felt most deeply and famously by the cohort that came to later be called (via M.L. Rosenthal, another critic) "the confessionals." Several, including Sylvia Plath (gassed in her kitchen in 1963), Anne Sexton (asphyxiated in her garage in 1974), and John Berryman (jumped off a bridge in 1972) were suicides. The patriarch of the movement, Robert Lowell, was hospitalized multiple times for mental disorders, including in-patient time in a psychiatric ward, and died of a heart attack at 60 (1977.) Alvarez, in his book called *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*, which appeared with great notoriety, at least in the poetry community, in 1971, attributes these dark outcomes to the art itself, using a long, dirge-like memoir about his relationship, critic to poet, with Sylvia Plath, as a portal to trace a heritage of death and despair in the poetic arts as far back as Dante. I recall how haunting and depressing I found it back then, which is why I won't read it again, not even for this purpose. But the fact of the matter is that it forced poets of my generation to really think about the potential "costs" of making the things we wanted to make.

Many of the aspiring poets I began to hang around with in the late 60s seemed to buy into Alvarez's myth quite enthusiastically, talking and behaving as if one couldn't be an authentic poet without teetering at the precipice of self-annihilation. The fuel that kept this risk machine running was alcohol, prodigious

amounts of it: Go out (or stay home), get drunk, write some poems. Since my reaction to booze moves very quickly from pleasantly tipsy to throwing up, and I did not find suicidal inclinations "Romantic," I was not a player in this community. Initially, I concluded that poetry simply wasn't my "cup of tea." My cup of tea was an actual cup of tea! So I exited the scene and forced myself to stop writing poems. After a while, though, this seemed to me to be a silly concession to a set of conventions that I was beginning to see were simply local to that moment, all the volatility of the 60s, so death-saturated, assassination after assassination, the violence in the streets and on campuses, the brutal war in Vietnam re-enacted in living rooms every evening on the news, a horror that was especially unnerving if you were male and draft-eligible, as I and most of the fledgling poets I knew were.

In any case, I decided to think this through for myself, to see if/how I might make poetry a part of my life without becoming suicidally alcoholic. That took some time, so I'll skip the juicy parts and give you the "executive summary" of what I concluded: First of all, that Alvarez was just wrong, got the whole life/death dynamic of poetic enterprise ass-backwards. The more I got to know about all those ill-fated poets, the more it seemed to me that poetry actually sustained their lives in the face of their extraordinary suffering, deferred rather than precipitated their fatal outcomes. All of the poets I mention had histories of mental illness that preceded their poetic careers. Poets are by nature extraordinarily sensitive people, and these were extraordinarily difficult times, the claustrophobic 50s first, when most of them were emergent, then the catastrophic 60s, which undid them. The mental illness of the moment for most of them was bi-polar disorder. Moving from the 50s to the 60s was like bi-polar disorder on a global scale.

I've had some hard times in my head and with my heart over the course of my life. Not on that scale, but not negligible either. I

want to insist, based on my experience, that poetry is not a death knell, it is a life force. It can sometimes keep you going when nothing else will. Yes, I did quit writing poems for several years in my mid-20s while I sorted out this business about what it would cost vs. what I was willing to pay. And I did quit writing poems again for many years from my mid-40s into my 60s. That latter spell had nothing whatsoever to do the darkness of the art. It had to do with what I perceived as the darkness of the publishing marketplace, where reception and rejection seemed more driven by fads and "schools" than worthiness. Artists in all fields face this conundrum: what to do when no one seems to want, or even value, what you do. It goes from challenging to frustrating to numbing, an ascending curve that can take years, even decades, to fully inscribe itself. If you're not careful, that can lead to a death in spirit even if not in body. Visual artists seem more inclined that way, though that may be because we learn about their untoward fates only after their completely ignored or much-maligned work becomes investment-grade. Poetry is rarely investment-grade. I exited the marketplace to keep myself sane, the same reason I wrote poems before that time and now since. Fortunately for me, when it became impossible for me NOT to write poems, in the aftermath of my wife's death, there was a niche that allowed me to end-around the traditional marketplace (where editors and publishers rather than artists regulate what comes out on top, or out of the tap at all): self-publication. When I started doing that 10 years ago, it was considered anathema, *career* suicide. I was already dead in the water of the poetry business in any case, so that was inconsequential to me. I actually liked it, still do, a way of "living hidden" in plain sight. Now self-publication is somewhat more acceptable. In 20 years, I believe, everyone will be wondering why it wasn't always the preferred path. My work is now free on my website and at-cost in paperback, the way I live now, free in my head, at-cost in the world. I highly recommend it.

James Wright, who in my opinion had a more significant impact on the general poetics that dominated the last third of the

20th century than any of the more flamboyant others I mention above, tends not to be included when sensationalized stories of the "savage god" of poetry get told, though he suffered greatly and similarly: multiple nervous breakdowns starting with one in high school, chronic alcoholism, death by cancer at 52. There is, no question, a deep dark streak in his poetry, beginning to end; but at least to my ears, it never sinks to the blank depths of Plath, rises to the manic flamboyance of Berryman, simmers with the sometimes sardonic rage of Sexton, or grinds with the word-jammed angst of Lowell. Beginning to end his poetry has a latent quietude to it. *The Branch Will Not Break (1963)* is incandescent. Almost single-handedly, in my opinion, he created a subtle subset of surrealism that came to be called (among other things) "deep imagism." Robert Bly tends to get co-credit for that, via his disjointed little book *Leaping Poetry*, published almost a decade after Wright's masterpiece, in which (in my opinion) he fundamentally misconstrues the Spanish, Eastern European, and Asian poetic traditions he claims to be channeling. Bly's greatest notoriety came later in his life, via his NYT bestselling book *Iron John: A Book About Men (1990)*, a Jungian exploration of the Wild Man archetype, Bly's long lament for the suppression of hard-core masculinity by modern civilization, with some weird ways to reignite it. It inspired a plethora of male-only retreats and getaways, early prototypes for the current manospheric podcast mania, where men with fragile egos lit fires and beat drums to resurrect their male identity. I hate to tell you, Bob, but if you can't feel like a real man in a culture so toxically patriarchal that it gives you 95% of it upfront for nothing, you have a problem fire and drums are not likely to solve.

If you want to know the magical power of Wright's brand of surrealism, read Jusuf Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dao* (1988), poems about his "crazy in the head" (a literal translation of the book's title) experiences during the Vietnam war, or Carolyn Forché's *The Country Between Us* (1981), poems about the tortuous horrors in El Salvador in the 70s. Brutal material,

beautiful poems, an almost unfathomable oxymoron. That's what Wright was so good at, what he showed others how to do. One spring day a couple of years ago I watched a magnificent Steller's jay do in a tree at Woodard Bay exactly what Wright's eastern bluejay does: spring "up and down, up and down," then leap branch to branch upward, astonishingly acrobatic, squawking wildly all the while. It was exhilarating. I thought of James Wright, how his body may have broken, but his branch didn't. Many really good poets learned how to leap on that unbreakable branch. "Deeply human" is one of the qualities that AI delivers if you ask what kind of person he was. The rest of what it says is generally positive. I never knew him personally, of course. But he always sounded to me in his poems like someone who really wanted to stay alive. For that reason, these days, I prefer to read him over the others. I really want to stay alive, too.

**July 11: In the Spirit … of authentic voices**

Anne Sexton's third book *Live or Die* won a much contested and highly controversial Pulitzer Prize. She is my favorite among the confessional poets I mentioned last time, up there with James Wright as my top picks of that era. Her little book of feminist-fractured fairy tales, *Transformations*, published in 1971, so out of kilter with her darker books, is a must read, the most surprising book I reviewed during my stint in that role, so multi-faceted, subtly sardonic, just delightful. I taught it several times in gen-ed creative writing classes, always a hit. There is an OH YEAH! ANNE SEXTON page on Tumblr, which tells you the range of her appeal.

I taught mostly writing courses during my professorial career, many of them entry-level composition classes, my favorite venues. I just loved the challenge of getting a group of young people who had no intrinsic motivation to write to a point where they really enjoyed it. One of the metaphors that was a commonplace in my line of work early on, during the 1970s, was "voice," as in how a writer can find an "authentic" one that can somehow be "heard" through the silence of a text. It's a cool way to think about words on a page for a reader, too, finding something like those "ears to hear" Jesus keeps harping about when his followers just don't get his point. At its (Greek) roots, the word authentic means "self-doer," which adds an element of agency, work both writer and reader need to do, to the conventional way of thinking about it as simply "genuine." I like that. This approach went out of favor really quickly, poof, once the "process" movement got underway in composition and anti-essentialist critical ideologies proliferated culturally. "Authenticity" was anathema to both. I actually wanted to use the cover of one of those textbooks as my header photo, but the only one I could find said "This is not the actual book cover." That's how out of favor those books went. More like disappeared.

So, I settled on Sexton, authenticity personified, great voice, too, as you'll find out below.

In any case, I've been thinking a lot about "voice" since I started these posts because I do some out-loud readings of poems, both mine and others.' One of the big pluses of being a poet is that most poems are designed to be read aloud. So you get used to the sounds of words bouncing around with one another, even if only in your head. And if you try to make a go of it as a poet, one of the ways to do that is with public readings, which I did a lot of between 1976, my first, and 1995, when I stopped, for reasons I explained in an earlier post. The next reading I did, my last, was in 2018, right before I left Pittsburgh for Olympia, in the beautiful back yard garden of a colleague's house in Pittsburgh, a very large audience of my favorite colleagues. I read selected poems from a three-part series of elegiac poems I wrote furiously, manically, in September 2016, the year after my wife died, (all collected now in a book called *September Threnody*.) I wrote a hundred pages of poetry that month which, if you've been following along here, is 10 years-worth of work at my usual pace. Nearly did me in. The reading that day made up for it, a magical event.

I did a bunch of one-or two-poem open-mic type readings after I got to Olympia, quick and easy, but soon lost interest in that. I recently had an opportunity to do a full-fledged reading of my recent work. I decided not to pursue it. Mostly so I could keep that event in Pittsburgh as my capstone. In any case, when you stand up in front of an audience and read your own most intimate words, you have to give some thought to how you want to "voice" them. One of the side-effects of all that work for me is that I actually "hear" how everything I write sounds, literally, as I write it. Sometimes I even feel the words moving around in my mouth. In effect, no matter what I write, it feels like I'm writing a poem to read, even something as trivial as a memo, which I wrote a lot of while I was working. I just like how words sound when they

learn to sing together. I should write a book: *Make Your Memos Sing.*

What I want to write about here, though, is how other poets sound, especially the ones I first heard reading their own work when I was in high school and college, before I started attending actual readings. Back then, it was mostly on vinyl, so you had to be famous to end up there. I was generally familiar beforehand with the poems being voiced, so had some unconscious expectations about how the poets would sound. I was quite often surprised by how differently their words sounded out of their makers' mouths compared to my ears. Below are a series of links, some YouTubes, some MP3s, to a few of my back-then favorites. With the exception of the final two, I never saw any of them read in person, which, in some ways, made them seem even more mysterious to me. You don't need to listen to all of them, and certainly not to all of each. Just the first few lines of the ones you're curious about will give you an idea of what I heard back then. And help you to keep those "voices" in mind if/when you read any of their work yourself. I'm including only poets in that narrow historical band after relatively good media for recording voice became available and before digital voice recordings became ubiquitous and easy to access, which means that the selection is generally weighted "male," a gender imbalance that, as I said in a previous post, was not only rectified but reversed by the 90s. There are tons of recordings of the great female poets of that era. All you have to do is pick a few of your favorites and Google them. The links below worked when I uploaded them, but that is no guarantee, I know, they'll work now. And some of them open with those annoying YouTube ads you have "skip" as soon as you're allowed. Sorry about all that. If you prefer to skip the sound files entirely, you can jump to my final paragraph where I make a case for earning back your own "authentic" voice from the cacophony of the current cultural echo-chamber, which seems expressly intent on drowning it out, even taking it away.

The first poet I ever heard read aloud, on a record I actually bought, was Dylan Thomas. His booming voice blew me away, Celtic to the core. I tried to find a recording of him reading "Fern Hill" (I can still hear him intoning the opening lines). The first one I found, claiming to be read by him, didn't have that weight at all, almost prissy, more British than Welsh. Either someone else did the reading or Thomas was not well when he did it. In any case, I did finally find this one, three poems, any one of which demonstrates the timbre of that voice. If you want "Fern Hill" jump to 2:25 in the YouTube. The first poem, "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night," is also an amazing (and famous) poem to which he does justice in this reading:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mRec3VbH3w

As long as I'm in the Celtic tradition, how about this one by W.B. Yeats, an early poem. One of the things I admire about Yeats is that he got better and better as he aged, some his most remarkable work coming after most poets are spent. I like to think I'm more like him than Wordworth, say, who considered himself past it when in his 30s. If you don't believe me, read his "Ode on Intimations of Immortality" which he started in 1802. "Whither is fled the visionary gleam?" he asks. "Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" Sounds like he should be my age. And he's 32! Here's Yeats reading "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," pretty scratchy, like it might have been taken from a record left out of its sleeve for years in a college dorm room back in the 60s:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLlcvQg9i6c

William Carlos Williams, one of my all-time favorites, had a voice that surprised me when I first heard it. I wasn't expecting Dylan Thomas, but his voice is edgy, thin, kind of wiry, not ideally suited to those amazing imagist poems I so loved from *Spring and All*, so I picked a later one, where the voice

actually works well, a poem called “The Descent,” as read here at his home in 1954 when he was almost 70:

https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Williams-WC/21_Rutherford-NJ_06-06-54/Williams-WC_01_The-Descent_Rutherford-NJ_06-06-54.mp3

T.S. Eliot has a voice in Williams’ register, but in his case ideally suited to his *oeuvre*, especially the early poems, “sere” is how I’d describe it, like fallen leaves on a dry November afternoon. Here’s him reading “Prufrock:”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAO3QTU4PzY

I probably should include Ezra Pound, but I just can’t stand him. So I’m going to move directly to H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), the poet whose career he both fledged and stifled by branding her, in 1912, as the ideal *Imagiste,* a straitjacket it took her 25 years to break out of. I may be in a minority, but I think she’s a better poet—the whole career considered—than Pound. And a way better human being, which is now, at my age, a pretty significant factor in my assessment protocol, the reason I’m probably the only poet in America who is not a big fan of Mary Oliver. Here’s H.D. reading a snippet from her long poem “Helen in Egypt,” in 1955, when she was in her late 60s:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIYKyP6LiHg

Here are some of the poets I’ve written about so far in these posts and first listened to in the 70s. This is Sylvia Plath reading “Tulips,” a stunning poem I’ll write more about in a future post. She sounds both fierce and frail, which is what she was:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIQojFKUfto

And here's Ann Sexton reading "Her Kind" in 1966. There is a sultry glamour in her voice, even when the material is dark. She had a wacky relationship with James Dickey (which I'll also say more about in a future post) who, as best I can tell, thought the best way to bed her (which he seemed obsessed with) was to insult her (which he did repeatedly, often in print.) He was as daft about women like her (she was amazing) as he was in his own poems (which are not.)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btz8RZHSQ2Q

I wrote my dissertation on John Berryman. He was a vexed and troubled man, rife with addictions. But for some reason I really liked his poems. Maybe because he was so forthright about his "plights and gripes" even when they were offensive, as they often were. And a very good reader of his own work. Here's him reading "Dream Song #29," one of my favorites:

https://soundcloud.com/poets-org/john-berryman-dream-song-29

As I said in a previous post, I am a great admirer of James Wright, who developed a poetic style called, among other things, "deep imagism," which became the dominant currency in American poetry for much of the last third of the 20th century. And he was as best I could tell back then and can find out now also a pretty good man despite his addictions and afflictions. As I said, that counts a lot for me. Here's him reading the poem I wrote about, "A Blessing:"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDcUSUUew9k

I'll conclude with the two poets whose in-person readings I found the most memorable, Robert Creeley and Galway Kinnell. I saw both of them read when they were older, well-established. They had by then crafted personae perfectly suited to rendering their work. Creeley's poems on the page can seem slight, off-handed.

His reading of those poems transformed them into magical wonders. The night I saw him read he was sporting a dark beard, a broad-brimmed black hat and a black eye patch. Each little word in those plain poems came alive like a floating butterfly on his voice. Fantastic, the best reading I ever witnessed. Here's him as a much younger man reading his famous poem "For Love:"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=__KquDywBWk

Kinnell was born in the US of Irish/Scottish descent, a Celtic heritage he played to the hilt. He was probably approaching my age when I heard him read, but he still had rugged good looks and read like he was confident at least one woman in the audience would want to go back to his room with him that night. I found it both creepy and charming. Here's him reading one of his then-famous poems as a younger man:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVmDPl4ydQ8

Finally, I actually believe that one good way to learn to love yourself more is to record and listen to your own voice, which can, at least initially, sound alien, discombobulating. Voice takes breath, which moves the inside outside and then draws the outside inside. When it is used with intention, it is an intimate expression of one's spirit as it merges with the world's. You reveal something deep and otherwise incommunicable about yourself through your voice. That's clearly so with singing. Reading a poem aloud is a kind of singing without instrumental accompaniment. It takes similar care to do it well. So, my advice, if you want to know who is in there *with* you, *as* you, *is* you, record your voice, listen to it, work with it, over and over, until you truly savor that sound, can't wait to hear it again, in other words, love it, the way you're supposed to love yourself. Every voice is unique, the fingerprint of an "authentic" spirit. You were born with yours. Cultures like ours work very hard to take it away. Take it back.

**July 16: In the Spirit … of "nothing" in partic(le)-ar**

This is the penultimate installment in my quantum-mechanics-ethics series, where I try to work out the everyday ways a shift from "classical" to "quantum" "lines of thought" might change my values and my behavior for the better, a project precipitated by the implications of Erwin Schrödinger's assertion that "the characteristic trait of quantum mechanics"—entanglement—"enforces its entire departure from classical lines of thought." The original classical vs. quantum pair I created to orchestrate this entry was "vacuum/field" (an absence/presence contrast.) I revised it today to "particle/field" (a presence/presence contrast) on the basis of the thinking I've done to get to this point. In fact, what I have now written in this series has turned out to be so different from what I started with, based on material drawn from my book *Willing Spirit*, that I had to go back and revise that original text pretty substantially in its light, which, luckily, I can do given the way I now publish my work. That in itself is a good example of how quantum fields operate, transferred into what we call a "universe of discourse:" constantly emergent, co- and re-creation always ongoing.

Think, for example, about how you're processing this sentence I'm writing. Is it a series of partic(le)-ar words, each with multiple possible definitions that you winnow down to an approximation based on the ones that preceded it, a sequence of adjustments you continue to make until you run into this question mark? And now with this sentence, do you then do it again? Or is it a gradually emerging sub-field of meaning that remains in relative suspension in the context of some uber-field that pre-constitutes it ahead of time? And is that larger field limited by a paragraph division? A section division? This whole essay? All of my previous books or Substacks, if you've read them? Or is it much more comprehensive even than that, like everything you already know

about physics and ethics, for example? Or me? Or yourself? Or more?

The same conundrum applies to me as I write one of these sentences. I can assure you that I do not know exactly what each specific word in any of them is going to be before I type it. In fact, before that one was over, I went back and added the word "exactly" because it became essential to what I was writing along the way. Am I stopping for a micro-instant after each space, inventorying the possible words that can come next, picking one and typing it, revising what came before as necessary? Or does a field of meaning I somehow have inchoate in my head gradually shape the sentences that evolve in its presence? And is that field fixed prior to what I write, or does it evolve in some significant ways as it becomes partic(le)-ated in the words it precipitates? I.e., do I simply translate what I already know into some code I hope you will be able to use to transfer it over into your own thinking? Or can I actually surprise myself with some new learning as I write and share that with you in real time (spoiler alert: I do)? As you can see, there is a big difference between these two models for imagining how a little "universe of discourse" like this operates.

The big universe is analogous. Whether you think of it as an assortment of distinct particles zooming around in voids at the astrophysical and nuclear levels—the classical model—or as an assortment of cooperative fields that draw no hard lines between big and small, material and immaterial—the quantum model—makes a similarly big difference. The feature of that system I'll focus on here is what constitutes a vacuum in space. Specifically, how does the meaning of "nothing" change as you move from one paradigm to the other?

In the classical paradigm space is imagined as a huge, static void within which many objects move around and interact, with time an extrinsic and universal yardstick to measure rates of change.

The vast majority of space is empty of everything, whether on the intergalactic scale or the atomic scale. These vacuums are absent energy. In this system "nothing" is really nothing. There are of course fields that can penetrate space. But they are generally induced locally, not extant universally.

In the quantum paradigm there is no such thing as a fully energy-depleted system. Space and time are one thing, spacetime, which hosts a vast assortment of fields that energize it continuously and everywhere at once. At the base level, in the *quantum* vacuum, particles and antiparticles fizz up endlessly and annihilate one another instantly, like constant static. Gravity curves spacetime into various manifold shapes through which other objects "fall" or circulate. And many other fields pulsate similarly everywhere, inviting tiny wave-like perturbations to emerge, take on mass, coagulate, and grow into the bigger things we can see. "Nothing" is *never* nothing.

By one way of counting there are at least 17 of these "other" fields (perhaps dozens more), one for each of the "particles" the Standard Model currently identifies. I put particles in quotation marks because at the level of these fields, a particle is simply a wave function that arises proudly enough out of its constantly buzzing field, via the input of a sufficient packet of energy, to achieve something we recognize as material status. Each of these standing waves can then interact (in specifically allowable ways) with other standing waves in other fields, relationships mediated (in specifically allowable ways) by different types of force-fields, to build bigger and bigger "things." One of the fascinating properties of spacetime in the quantum paradigm is that every "bit" of it is entangled with every other "bit" of it, such that strange things, like energy teleportation—quantum energy transfer—may become possible under the right circumstances.

Physicists (at least of the YouTube variety) invent various visual images to suggest what these fields are and how they interact.

You've probably seen the famous one that Einstein (who had an extraordinary ability to visualize his thought experiments well in advance of even mathematics, let alone language) imagined of the universe as a sort of large rubber sheet with a bunch of dips and depressions created by the massive objects floating through it. The task of trying to reimagine how that operates in four dimensions instead of two is challenging. The task of trying to reimagine all of those *quantum* fields into the four dimensions of spacetime (or the 10 dimensions string theory posits!) instead of the two dimensions of TV space is impossible, at least for me. The most commonly used images for these fields are a sort of wavy mesh or a multi-level parfait, each line or layer a different color, some occupied by the particles with mass, some by the massless forces that regulate their interactions. In reality, of course, they are not swirling or stacked in this way. They are always already everywhere simultaneously. The wifty relationships among them are more like a symphony than a pinball machine.

Somehow each "particle" and "force" knows its place, its role, and its options in the system. Or at least that's the most sense I can make in words of what seems to be happening all the time at the quantum level. The best discourse for describing this action is mathematics, which is elegant, clear and precise. But it takes considerable expertise to use it. When I was able to do higher level math I recall how it transported me into something akin to a vast immaterial space through which I felt I was both whirling around on a carnival swing carousel (controlled by the wires that kept the chair from flying off) and playing a video game (controlling a relatively limited joystick.) Sometimes the ride was exhilarating, sometime nauseating. I decided I'd rather engage with the world through poetic figures, which is what I've done. Ironically, as quantum mechanics has evolved, physicists tend to explain what they know to non-experts via similarly poetic figures. All that said: Since I can't do the math to "show my work" here, you should take all of this with a big grain of salt and

do some work of your own to check and correct me. Lots of YouTubes you can start with. Watch one, and the algorithm will give you more and more.

So what happens if I shift my allegiance from space as a stable vacuum with some partic(le)-ated things in it to spacetime as an array of constantly energized, spontaneously interacting fields that can make new things? The most obvious effect is the one I've mentioned multiple times already in these posts: I'm no longer a super-I-am separate from everything else and in command of the material universe; I am simply an assortment of aggregated waves that has become intelligent enough to understand that "one is all, all is one." That taps directly into a lot of the work I've been doing, and writing about along the way here, to fathom Eastern philosophies, early Christian heresies, and Indigenous cultures, which are in general accord with this way of thinking about what my "presence" here does and means.

One concept that gets reconceptualized in the shift from an economy of particles to an economy of fields is solitude. In the classical paradigm every "thing" in the universe is distinct and separate, flying around in a void, separated by definition from everything else. On the physical plane, gravity functions as an attractive force drawing things toward one another generally, or keeping things in orbit around one another locally, a sort of weak glue that holds the whole shebang together, a static universe moving stuff around mechanistically on a large scale and hierarchically locally. If you translate all of that into the human plane, the thing that keeps the social universe from disaggregating into a congeries of solipsistic "souls" competing against one another for resources is a very robust concept of God, or god-substitute, a sort of universal spiritual gravity. That's why, in my opinion, Enlightenment thinkers went to such great lengths to get God back in after they set up their deterministic systems. Descartes is a classic example. His gyrations to find a way to reinsert God to guarantee that his essentially isolated "I am" is not

demonic are almost comical to me. Which is why the "death of God" period in the 20th century led to so many dystopian visions of human alienation, each of us alone in a dark, meaningless void. The real problem in this paradigm is not whether God is in or out, it's that the stereotypical Western God is, like gravity, a relatively weak force acting mechanistically from outside-in; so you need strong *human*-led, hierarchically-structured institutional systems, "organized" religions, say, to make it stick. And they generally don't get on well with one another, which merely bumps competitive separateness up to a higher level. That's one of the reasons I spend so much time thinking and writing about non-Western spiritual ideologies. If you aspire to a social/cultural universe animated from the inside-out by amity and unanimity, the classical paradigm is a "you can't get there from here" model.

The tipping point for all of this in the Christian church, the one I'm most familiar with, was not the Enlightenment but a relatively obscure 4th and 5th century contest between Augustinian and Pelagian approaches to the relationship between the human and natural universes. Augustine, on the "Roman" side, now famous for his conversion from a debauched to a saintly life recorded in his *Confessions*, the first Western autobiography, favored a vision of humans born "against God" into a dark universe with Adam's "original" sin inscribed in them indelibly by the corrupt sexual act that led to procreation, the only redemption a radical intervention of God from the outside in, Catholic baptism. Absent that, there was no possibility for salvation, which, among other things, necessitated the invention of Limbo, a place where unbaptized infants could go, out of God's presence but not burning in hell. For Augustine, human history is an ongoing war between the elect (the City of God) and the damned (the City of Man), the fate of each a matter of predestination. Redemption is always futural, never now. This is the (pre)classical paradigm abstracted to its extreme into the spiritual realm.

Pelagius, on the “Celtic” side, now famous for the heresy that bears his name, favored a vision of humans born “with God” into a universe of light, essentially good from the outset, redemption a given that can be threatened by corruption but always recovered. Godly goodness is imbued equally and equitably not only in every person no matter their express faith, but in the natural world, down to the smallest elements. He was especially enamored by the visage of infants, the embodiment of innocence in his view. No need for Limbo here. This is a (pre)quantum paradigm abstracted to its extreme into the spiritual realm. After a long series of battles in the juridical apparatus of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy, Augustine prevailed, Pelagius was exiled and excommunicated, his writings were purged, and, well, we are where we are. The Enlightenment merely re-sealed that deal on the terms we currently accept.

In the quantum paradigm you can get to the Pelagian state of universal inclusion at every level (my personal preference) with or without God. Which may be why Augustine, an instinctive authoritarian, stayed in full lather long enough to see to it that this DEI-type alternative-Christianity was stamped out in his bailiwick. Sound familiar? Some stories have Pelagius retreating to Ireland or Wales, the last bastions amicable to his message, where he continued to publish his thoughts, but under the names of either Augustine or his buddy (the also-now-Saint) Jerome, a similarly irascible autocrat who was especially snippy about Pelagius’ inclination to include women equitably in his ministry, deigning to meet them “among their spindles and wickerwork.” Can’t have decisions of moral consequence being made in a sewing circle, now, can we, Jerry. Coincidentally it was another Augustine (of Canterbury) who set up the Roman church in England in 596, which gradually chipped away at this last stronghold of Celtic Christianity, starting with the Synod of Whitby in 664, where the by-then well-worn heresy argument prosecuted by Augustine, et al., was given a well-received warm-over.

Okay, probably more than you want to know about all of this. So back to my regularly scheduled programming: If, as physicists speculate, every single "bit" of spacetime is entangled with every other "bit" always and everywhere, collective intimacy is endemic to the system. You can't NOT get there from here! And, further, if the physical universe is always energized at its base level and animated by a vast array of interacting fields designed to both create and unify every "thing" we see and, just as importantly, everything we don't, the only possibility for isolation is one imposed from the outside in for "self"-ish human purposes, capitalism, for example.

A cultural apparatus of that sort tends to view "solitude" as an aberrant assertion of agency to evade oversight, either valorizing those who specialize in it as sages, saints, or visionaries (after they're dead), or stigmatizing those who indulge in it as misanthropes, loners, or anarchists (while they're alive.) Both strategies sideline such practitioners into "safe" spaces, conserving the system they challenge by pre-defining them as outside it.

I am both one of those people and none of those things. I live an essentially solitary life without ever being or feeling alone. For one thing, I truly enjoy my own company, and I mean, literally, "my company," which includes multiple layers and versions of myself that I can, when I want, put into active conversation, like Bakhtin's polyphony all in one head, or Whitman's "multitudes" reveling in their "contradictions." So, for me, solitude has a built-in dialogical component, "others" always present. And I am never disconnected from, let alone dissociated from, the world around me, including the human universe. Which is to say, in the parlance of this essay, that I do not experience myself as a particle in a vacuum. Ever. My experiences, whether solitary or social, always happen in the energized "fields" of pretty much everything around me. That is especially so when I'm out walking, the other presences I encounter, some beautiful, some mundane radiating

not just life but meanings in frequencies my body, every part of it when I'm right, is, like yours, tuned to receive and respond to, our having co-evolved *with* them for many, many millennia.

The same applies when I'm engaged in social interactions that are field-oriented; i.e., when I and my interlocutor(s) are on the same "wavelength(s)," our presence(s) co-creating, via discourse, a third-party-between, who is not identical with either/any one of us partic(le)-arly. We all exit those interactions as at least slightly different people than we were beforehand, changed in ways that feel salutary. Whether that happens with another person right in front of me, on Zoom, on the phone, via email or text, with a book or a tree, or just by myself, is immaterial. The key is that (ex)changes of consequence take place, "nothing" becoming "something" by revealing itself as the never-nothing it always was, all via the alchemy of mutual presence. Fields operate in exactly that way. Particles do not. Which is my point, the figures at the heart of this little essay returning now to their starting point having, I hope, been changed by the field of words that has intervened between there and here on the page, and even more importantly between "you" and "me" in the biosphere outside of it.

**July 21: In the Spirit … of "tears and laughter"**

I was rereading some of my favorite Swinburne poems last night. I like the weird overwhelm of his work. Even his name, Algernon Charles, has that aspect. How he looked, too: that long, flaring, curly red hair framing his thin face. There's an ice cream I buy from time to time, Extra Chocolate Peanut Butter. A couple of scoops of that and you're on a cocoa high for a while. Not a good "daily driver" in my ice cream cycle. But when I want it, I really like it. Swinburne is like that. I can't remember any other poet I've known personally along the way who was a fan. Or anyone else, really, for that matter. In some respects, 20th century poetics—the stiff austerity that animated the New-Criticism-induced modernists, Eliot through Lowell; the casual simplicity of the mid-century "in the American grain" imagism inspired by W.C. Williams that runs through at least Gary Snyder, even the "deep imagists" if you squint hard enough; the simmering intensity of the identity/diversity/social justice poetry that emerged in the 60s and flourished in the 80s and 90s—all could be read in some ways as "Hey, let's at least not do Swinburne!"

Oddly enough, Ezra Pound was an early fan, though that fell off, given his overall agenda. Allen Ginsburg has a fascinating take on this genealogy here if you're interested:

https://allenginsberg.org/2015/09/swinburne-pound-and-bridges/

He's talking specifically about a technique Pound uses, derivative, he says, from Swinburne:

> *. . . that "da-da" at the end – if you notice the paradigms at the end, the end of the adonic line and the end of the hendecasyllabic line when it's in the Sapphic mode, very*

*often ends with two long, or two accented (stresses) – or, some special emphasis on the last syllable, if it's a two-syllable word like "shadow", "ending", "sea-mark", "lions."*

Ginsburg goes off on a long riff about this arcane stuff, as he was wont to do both talking and writing as he got older. "Howl" on Adderall. Logophilia gone loco.

T.S. Eliot had a vexed view of Swinburne. In an essay called "Swinburne as Poet" in his landmark book *The Sacred Wood*, he acknowledges Swinburne's technical "genius." Read one page of Swinburne, and you have to agree. Maybe only George Gordon (Lord Byron) among poets who wrote before rhyme went out of favor for good is more masterful at that aspect of poetic composition. But Eliot ultimately dismisses his poetry as lacking "beauty of sound, or of image, or of idea." Okay, the "idea" part for sure, and maybe "image" if you take Ezra Pound's enigmatic and pallid notion of it as gospel, which Eliot did: "That which presents and intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." But sound? No way; that's Swinburne's wheelhouse! Basically, Eliot thought Swinburne was skillful but shallow. Which is pretty much what he thought about every other poet except Pound. Even Shakespeare wasn't quite up to snuff: See "Hamlet and His Problems," same book, where he claims the play is "an artistic failure" and then comes up with what he calls the "objective correlative"— that perfect figurative "formula" for evoking the desired "emotion," which he believes can never be rendered directly— to explain why. And he's particularly dismissive of William Wordsworth: See "Tradition and the Individual Talent," same book, where he dismantles Wordsworth's trademark claim (without even mentioning his name) that poetry is founded on "emotion recollected in tranquillity," taking serious issue with every term in that phrase except "in." As in: "Yeah, Bill, that's really interesting, but it's 'inexact,' in that you're utterly wrongheaded about all of it."

Which is simply to say that Swinburne was sidelined as a poet of consequence long before I came along. But what can I say, I like him, always have. And, really, the whole little Pre-Raphaelite oasis in the otherwise arid (to me) late-Victorian era: William Morris, the Rosettis, the early (before Raphael, thus the name) Renaissance painters they favored for inspiration, like Fra Angelico and Giotto, soft, earthy palettes, luminous imagery, ethereal moods, kind of flat on the canvas, not quite iconographic, not yet 3D embodiment, as if they're halfway between here and heaven (or is it the other way around?) I just like that stuff. And Swinburne, too, the way I read him anyway. Here's my favorite passage from his work (brackets for de-gendering):

I am tired of tears and laughter,
    And [those] that laugh and weep;
Of what may come hereafter
    For [those] that sow to reap:
I am weary of days and hours,
Blown buds of barren flowers,
Desires and dreams and powers
    And everything but sleep.

Me, too, Algie, at least today. I feel your vibe. That's a long detour to get to what I really want to talk about here, a group of poems I wrote almost 50 years ago that I had pretty much forgotten about until I read Swinburne's "The Garden of Proserpine" last night. Took me a while today to find those poems in my computer files. I thought maybe they were lost. Then I remembered they were published in a small magazine back in the mid-80s, so from my CV I got what I needed to search my hard drive. I just added them to my book *Mornings After: Selected Poems 1975-95,* along with a whole trove of similarly "dark" poems I found while I was looking.

When I sent my *Harvest Moon* poems—the second series I wrote after my wife passed, as wild, manic, and sardonic a "grief sequence" as you're ever likely to find—to the friend whose gift to me, a lovely porcelain statue of Li Po, inspired the first series, *Li Po-ems*, my poignant, intimate conversations with that great Chinese poet, her response started this way: "To be honest, I was a bit shocked. Yes, I see a different side of you!" Fortunately, she "got" those poems, and the "you" who wrote them, and is still my friend, at least in part because she has a head as animated by Bakhtin's "polyphony" and Whitman's "multitudes" as the one I ascribed to myself in the previous post. "Many times," she went on, "I laughed out loud; in between I was suddenly silent, too, and my heart was tied by the words you wrote." I'm not sure these poems have that bipolar dynamism, but they invite the same nuanced response. As Whitman says, same poem: "you shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself," a pretty solid mantra for any poet. I have no idea how I lost track of all the stuff I found today, or why I didn't include it in the current iteration of *Mornings After* in the first place. Maybe to keep that "side" of myself to and for just myself, safe in a way.

Basically, my "career" as a poet has two halves: my 25-45 years and my 65-now years. I've briefly accounted for my "missing years" in a previous post. Unlike those speculative stories about where Jesus went between 12 and 30, I did not spend them in Shambala or Timbuktu turning myself into a true guru. I had two kids, a job, and was "tired" of the "tears and laughter" it takes to cope with copious rejections. The book I just mentioned covers my "early" period. As I read it now, especially with this added "side," at least some of which was in many of the rejected iterations that precipitated the long gap, I can't believe I couldn't find anyone willing to publish it. It's that good.

The myth of Proserpine is really interesting, her getting dragged into the underworld by Pluto—one of those human trafficking episodes in Roman mythology, the god who can't get the girl he

wants, so he hijacks her; her mother's grief causing permanent winter; Jupiter brokering a deal to get Pluto to let her come up for part of the year, creating the seasons. The Greek equivalent of Proserpine is Persephone, pretty much the same story. When I woke up this morning, the first line of the first poem of my "lost" poems was in my head: "Persephone snickered . . ."

The series is called "Nine Lives" and is basically a catalogue of dystopian "dating" vignettes from the miasmic "laugh and weep" years between my marriages. I wrote the poems in the late-70s, as my failed first marriage transitioned from dissolution through separation into divorce, which, if you've been there, you know is not a "magically delicious" process. So let's just say my head was not in a good place. I had an apartment about 50 feet off Walnut Street in Shadyside, which in Pittsburgh back then was the meet-up mecca for young people, many bars, some with live bands, dark, crowded, funky places, more for drinking than dancing, a few years before disco and yuppies were invented and those spots got polished into "clubs." I put "dating" in quotation marks because most of the poems are based loosely on one-offs that eventuated from my evenings-out in those venues, some of which never made it outside their walls. I have no idea what possessed me to think that attempting to "meet and greet" was a good idea right then, except maybe that trauma makes you stupid. Sometimes real stupid. If you've ever tried to do that during such an interim, you know that your prospective paramours are understandably skeptical about both your intentions ("Is this guy really 'over her,' or just 'over?'") and your prospects ("Hey, he's a one-time loser. Maybe he's just a loser.") All perfectly justified. In retrospect, I'd say that the eight women depicted in these poems (I'm the ninth life), if they had been poets, would likely have written even darker poems than mine about "him."

After a while, "weary of days and hours/ Blown buds and barren flowers/ Desires and dreams and powers/ And everything but sleep," I decided just to stay home, get my own "affairs" sorted.

The “Morning Songs” I wrote about a couple of posts ago were my “coming out of it” poems. These are the “going into it” poems. I’m not entirely sure what Swinburne has to do with all of this, but I know he’s in it. That’s why I woke up with Persephone snickering this morning. Something maybe to do with liking things “just because.” There’s an episode of “The Rockford Files,” same vintage, where Jim’s dad asks him why he got so deeply hooked in a relationship that was clearly destined for wreckage. He says, “I liked her! I just *liked* her!” That’s how I feel about Swinburne, and, really, felt about most of these women (names changed, of course, to protect the innocent) despite the edginess of the poems. Fortunately, a few years down the line, a woman came along who just liked me, too. For thirty-some years, until she passed. I’m glad I waited. She was magical, many morning songs to wake up with! No snickering. Here are those pre-her poems:

**Nine Lives**

I

Persephone snickered,
her beehive mind abuzz with
digressions. He
glanced at the calendar
of love and offered her
honey, sticky fingers
picking at her wings.
He did not believe
in anything, not even her
lips. She kissed him,
sticky fingers picking
at his wings.

II

"Some people do not matter
and never will." Martha
wondered if she was
one of them.
She talked the room
full of fudge.
He ate it.
She sat and
waited, sated,
always afraid
her skinny legs
were getting fat.

III

Rebecca stuck to
her guns. He slung
his hands low over
her hips, swung her
to some sweet music.
Rebecca stuck to her
guns like glue.

IV

Stephanie slept with
sorrow in her arms.
He came and went
like sighs between
her teeth. She kept
an empty glass to catch
his breath. He slept
soundly elsewhere,
left her sheets intact.

V

Carla towered over
him, breathed power
even in her sleep.
He grew hair on his chest,
talked tough through
clenched teeth, reached
roughly up to clutch
her cheeks, as if to kiss
her. Carla lowered
herself
slowly
. . . if at all.

VI

Dolores came like pain
And stayed all day.
He predicted rainy weather
in his joints. She loved
the loneliness of owning
things. He coveted
her tarnished moon
and stars. Dolores
came like rain
and stayed the night.

VII

Stella struck him
as ornery. He fumbled
not to tell her anything
he felt. When she
stumbled on his
story Stella struck.

VIII

Molly wanted nothing
she could have
and anything she couldn't.
He spoke hopefully
of love.
She complained
that sunset was a different
color every evening.
He sat amazed in his chair
that there was ever
light at all, that even as
it faded it felt
warm enough to hold.

## July 22: In the Spirit … of right now

The poems I wrote about yesterday, and the period of my life they evoked, haunted me all day and all night, left me distressed and sleepless, an inescapably bitter taste in my mouth, the living embodiment of what reading Swinburne somehow excavated from my memory, those "lost" years, all the inner disturbance that somehow gets hidden from view under simple words, like "divorce," say, such a common occurrence in our time, a 50-50 outcome for most marriages, so what's the big deal? Well, all I can say is even 50 years later my memory seems to be telling me mine might still need some work. I've experienced an immeasurably greater loss in the meanwhile, worked hard to come to terms with it, and I have. So I know how to do that. This one will be much easier, starting right now.

I believe there's a reason (not a good one, forgetfulness is never the best response to failure) I lost track of those poems. And I'd like to wish (because it would be easier) I hadn't found them again. But that's just not how life works, or time. I have a post lined up about "quantum time," which would be useful here. In the end (spoiler alert), in my view at least, it's just like "classical" time: Once something is done, it's done, fixed, non-negotiable. It's what comes next, right now, that is optional and most matters. If you've experienced loss, and the darkness that follows (who hasn't?), you know that in your bones, too. It's what comes next, right now, that most matters. The myth of Proserpine that Swinburne resuscitated is a good example. Once she's "taken" by Pluto, there's no going back, at least not all the way. In fact, one of the alternative names for Prosperine, in the Greek (Persephone) version of the story, the one that disinterred those poems for me, is Kore, meaning "maiden," which was no longer used after her abduction, for obvious reasons. The endless winter provoked by her mother's despair is the immediate result. Zeus (the Greek Jupiter) intervenes by sending an ambassador, Helios, to Hades

(the Greek Pluto) to bring her back. The compromise is a half-and-half deal, spring and summer up here, fall and winter down there. The good thing is we get the seasons. The bad thing is it happened in the first place. A year of springs and summers is just better, at least in my opinion, as I sit here writing in the midst of another glorious Olympia summer after another glorious Olympia spring. Fall and winter are okay here, but gray and wet wear on me. I'm always deeply grateful when Persephone comes back up again. And, as I write this, I am similarly grateful for the guidance she's providing me to find the words I need to resurrect myself today from the "winter" induced by those other words yesterday.

William Carlos Williams has a beautiful poem (named by its first line: "Of asphodel, that greeny flower") written late in his life as he's trying to come to terms with the effect to his profligacy on his marriage to Flossie. Here are the opening lines:

*Of asphodel, that greeny flower,*
*like a buttercup*
*upon its branching stem-*
*save that it's green and wooden-*
*I come, my sweet,*
*to sing to you.*
*We lived long together*
*a life filled,*
*if you will,*
*with flowers. So that*
*I was cheered*
*when I came first to know*
*that there were flowers also*
*in hell.*

The poem concludes this way:

*Of asphodel, that greeny flower,*
*I come, my sweet,*
*to sing to you!*
*My heart rouses*
*thinking to bring you news*
*of something*
*that concerns you*
*and concerns many men. Look at*
*what passes for the new.*
*You will not find it there but in*
*despised poems.*
*It is difficult*
*to get the news from poems*
*yet men die miserably every day*
*for lack*
*of what is found there*

Yes, "it is difficult to get the news from poems." But "what is found there" can often be redemptive. Today a part of my oft-broken heart is healing because of what I'm finding there, which is another way of saying what I said about poetry in my post about "The Savage God:" It is a lifegiving spring, not winter in the death grip of the underworld. The poems I "found" yesterday may have taken eight lives. But they're also telling me there is still one left: mine. And if I use it wisely to find the poems I need I will be less likely to "die miserably every day," including right now, today, the day that always most matters.

I recalled this morning as I woke a series of 50 sonnets that George Meredith wrote in the late 19th century called "Modern Love," a deceptively innocuous title. He lived for a while with Gabriel Rossetti after the death of his wife, so is loosely associated with the Pre-Raphaelite movement. I read those poems for the first time in college and have not revisited them since. Meredith is, at best, a "minor" poet in historical terms. I had never even heard of him before I read these dark, heart-wrenching

poems about his failed marriage. I remember how stunned I was by the "modernity" of them, all of that brutal honesty in the midst of a cultural moment so repressed it had to invent Sigmund Freud to untangle its secrets. Here's the first of them, to give you a taste:

*By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:*
*That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,*
*The strange low sobs that shook their common bed*
*Were called into her with a sharp surprise,*
*And strangely mute, like little gasping snakes,*
*Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay*
*Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away*
*With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes*
*Her giant heart of Memory and Tears*
*Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat*
*Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet*
*Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,*
*By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.*
*Like sculptured effigies they might be seen*
*Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;*
*Each wishing for the sword that severs all.*

Some time later today, or this week, I'm going to read them all again. I'm quite sure they will not replace the bitter taste of my own poems with something sweeter. They all sound like the first one, if my memory serves. But their bitterness will be cleansing in any case, a seeming contradiction that is actually quite logical, if you've had to taste bitter along the way: Sometimes the antidote is even more bitter.

Which calls to mind, right now, a poem by one of my favorite late 19th century American poets, Stephen Crane, typically cryptic in its stunning brevity:

*In the desert*
*I saw a creature, naked, bestial,*

*Who, squatting upon the ground,*
*Held his heart in his hands,*
*And ate of it.*
*I said, "Is it good, friend?"*
*"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;*
*"But I like it*
*"Because it is bitter,*
*"And because it is my heart."*

Which calls to mind, right now, one of my other dark poems I found on my hard drive while I was looking for "Nine Lives," called "Sleight of Hand:"

*Let me explain to you*
*that this is not in any manner*
*mysterious, what I am about to do, I mean,*
*right before your eyes.*
*But you must pay close attention:*
*Here is a round bowl*
*into which I pour one liter*
*of distilled water.*
*It is just enough for one of us*
*to survive for one night*
*in the desert.*
*In a few moments I will allow you to decide*
*in which direction you wish me to turn.*
*On the one hand*
*I will simply climb the stairs,*
*take off my clothes and go to sleep.*
*You will find yourself alone here,*
*staring contentedly at one goldfish*
*in a round bowl*
*as it puckers its mouth*
*over and over*
*breathing.*

*On the other hand*
*I will stride directly at you,*
*passing right through*
*everything that stands between us.*
*You will hear nothing*
*but the monotonous sound*
*of my voice warning you over and over*
*that you have gone too far now ever to get back,*
*that to do so you would have to cross*
*both your desert and mine*
*with nothing but one liter of distilled water*
*in a round bowl*
*in which we are both now swimming*
*unable even to breathe.*

Sooner or later most of us have a desert to cross. I guess my takeaway, after all of this, is it's better in advance of that to "simply climb the stairs," get a good night's sleep, and not try to entice anyone else to take the trip with you after you wake up. True love, always the antidote to great loss, has many faces. That's not one of its prettiest. But, when the darkness comes, it's the best. "One liter of distilled water" is enough for you to make it to the other side by yourself, where your partly healed heart will be waiting eagerly to greet you. I can already feel, having followed the trail of oases these poems have proffered, I am almost there. And, in retrospect, I'm already glad that my own dark poems enticed me to set off on this journey, by myself, right now.

**July 26: In the Spirit … of entanglement**

> *The law is that all things fuse that can fuse, and nothing separates except what must. . . . The baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin, and entrails at once, feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion; and to the very end of life, our location of all things in one space is due to the fact that the original extents or bignesses of all the sensations which came to our notice at once, coalesced together into one and the same space.*
>
> William James, *The Principles of Psychology, 1890*

This is the final installment (some of you may be relieved to hear) of my quantum-mechanics-ethics series. I know I teased a piece on quantum time in my last post, one now lined up in my queue, but like the concept of time itself in physics—absurdly extant from space in the classical paradigm, one giant clock ticking at the same rate everywhere; haplessly vexed in the quantum paradigm, all of our conventional tropes for understanding it breaking down at some point on both the astrophysical and the subatomic scales—I just find it hard to consider it integral with this sequence.

So, in conclusion, I want to revisit the aspect of the quantum paradigm that Erwin Schrödinger pointed out a century ago and that started me down this path, "*the one that enforces its entire departure from classical lines of thought:"* entanglement. I like the efficiency of that: one concept "that enforces" an "entire departure" not just from esoteric ways of measuring space and time but ultimately from all those "lines of thought" that are well past their prime now. If you're into "change management" this is the mother lode! Just replace "isolated" (the classical model) with "entangled" (the quantum model) in your conceptual frame for

"things" in the universe and you're right-here-now instead of back-there-then.

You might still be wondering: "So why go to all this trouble? Western civilization is rife with moral systems that already say pretty much what you're getting at here." Well, take a look out there. How's all that going for us? Right, thought so. Here's two things the quantum paradigm has going for it by comparison:

1. You can derive our most cherished human values inside-out from the fundamental principles that organize the universe we live in instead of imposing them from the outside-in via some "higher" power, whether transcendent, anointed, self-appointed or elected. By this means you can at least impede if not overcome the Western addiction to hierarchy, orthodoxy, authority, and patriarchy (inevitable in the outside-in model) replacing them with equity, self-actualization, critical inquiry, and gender neutrality (all derivative from the inside-out model.)

2. You can reach consensus with those wisdom traditions I've been indexing along the way, the ones that promote ways to live with rather than against one another, the natural world that sustains us, and even ourselves. We can, then, focus on working collectively to save the place we're best suited for because we evolved in and with it; instead of ogling admiringly a few mega-rich, transhuman tech-bros as they map out their itinerary to another planet where they can re-propagate *their* dystopian version of the human species, while the rest of us bake, drown or suffocate in the one they ravage on their way out.

William James came along a generation before quantum mechanics was even a twinkle in the eye of Schrödinger and his colleagues. And the quote I take (above) from his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) has to be stretched quite a bit to apply to entanglement. But I don't think it's a stretching he'd necessarily be averse to. So stretch it I will, via my final contrast:

**Isolated/entangled**

In the classical paradigm space is populated by a vast assortment of separate and distinct things that interact with one another in various predictable ways, often violently, rarely intimately. Like "civilized" human beings in that respect. The sum of the mass of those things comprises the physical universe, the machine. It became clear during the 20th century that this model could not possibly work without the addition of vast amounts of what we now call dark matter to provide a framework for those things to arrange themselves in the ways they clearly do and dark energy to expand that framework at the exponential rate it was clearly expanding. Via these calculations, what we actually see is only about 5% of what's out there. That's a big problem, but it doesn't necessarily undermine the assumption that all of those well-cossetted things are isolated entities careening through space on their mandated paths. In such a system it is actually common sense to assume that the whole shebang must have been designed from the outside in, the God/universe binary; and that we stand apart from the material universe, from one another, and even from our embodied selves, the mind/body binary. Thus, the rabid individualism and sense of entitlement (in relation to Earth, among other things) built into the "classical lines of thought" that still permeate our culture. Always at odds. With everything.

Entanglement not only calls all of that into question, it precludes it. At the most fundamental level entanglement is the built-in inclination of unattached subatomic particles to unite with one another when they meet. This is not a once in a blue moon phenomenon that requires highly specialized laboratory conditions. It happens to subatomic particles all the time, is built into their nature, a kind of love at first sight instinct. Once this entanglement occurs, the two entities behave as if they were one no matter how far apart they get. Not two things somehow communicating with one another instantly through the void, but one continuous wave function. When we measure the state

(angular momentum, say) of one of the "pair," we divine/ determine the state of the other instantaneously, no matter how far apart they are. No obeying the speed limit of light. Einstein, as the inventor of the speed of light as an absolute limit, had a problem with that, understandably, calling it "spooky action at a distance." He just couldn't rationalize how two seemingly separate things could "communicate" in that way that fast. And this action would be spooky if it was at a distance. But in reality it is not. Entangled particles are in fact one thing, aspects of the same wave function, co-present with one another non-locally. So there is no distance to be spooky at.

These particles go on to entangle themselves with others in their "environment" until their special relationships become more and more diffuse, leading to what is called decoherence. When the system becomes sufficiently decoherent, which doesn't take long, it appears (to us) to behave like a classical one in which the wave function has "collapsed" instead of a quantum one still in some superpositional state, which is why so many of our intuitive assumptions about spacetime can remain credible even if they are founded on gross errors about the nature of "things." And why every-thing looks individuated to us. In quantum field theory, every aggregation of entangled particles, up to and including the whole universe, can, theoretically, be expressed as one wave function, a singular state of being. And every "bit" of spacetime is somehow entangled with every other "bit" of spacetime, an unfathomably complex unity. Which means everything (no hyphen) is one.

So what's my takeaway from all of this as it might pertain to a way of being in the world and a set of ethical values? Premising behavioral consequences at the human level on the mysterious properties and behaviors of subatomic particles is risky. There is no incontrovertible evidence to prove that entanglement can persist as an observable feature of human-level macro-systems. So everything I say from here on is speculative, more the

province of philosophy, mysticism, or, least generously, new agey nonsense, than physics. But I'm going to go there anyway. I take as my guiding principle the one I mentioned in my previous post, Philip Ball's "not what is, but what if." As in, what if "reality" is not some hybrid of quantum and classical systems but is quantum in its entirety, smallest to largest, from the inside all the way out?

The history of physics is rife with moments when the community believed its model was almost "finished," on the verge of explaining everything. There was one such at the end of the 19th century. Had Michelson and Morley found that the speed of light was variable in their now famous experiment, it would have stayed that way. They didn't. So Einstein had to invent relativity. Quantum mechanics followed on its heels. You go from thinking you know nearly everything to realizing you know next to nothing in one generation. The current confidence among many physicists that a "theory of everything" is right around the corner is an expression of that same delusion. All of which is to say that today's seemingly outlandish speculation may well be tomorrow's truth.

I take my general guidance in what follows here from Schrödinger. He says "entire departure!" That's a bold statement. And I want to follow its imperative to a set of conclusions that make sense at least to me, right now, along the inside-out trajectory I've been documenting in spiritual and poetic traditions along the way here. I'll start all the way on the inside, with "intelligence," specifically whether/how human intelligence can be emulated artificially via electronic systems. In other words, what is the relationship or difference between AI and just plain IAm? The assumption that has dominated in this arena ever since computers were developed, but with a vengeance since the early 1970s when systems like Deep Blue became all the rage, is that the brain is essentially a complex system of binary switches that processes reality (i.e., "thinks") the way a computer does. The illogic of this way of modelling cognition is apparent: These

binary computing systems were invented to do more quickly *some* of the things brains can do, therefore brains *must be* binary computing systems; if we create more and more complex versions of them, sooner or later they will replicate brains. This is a prototypical example of the problem with the classical paradigm: What's out there functions this way; so what's in here must function that way, too**.** There's a name for that logical fallacy, but it's so apparent to me I don't even want to take the time to Google it.

Is there a viable quantum-based alternative to this way of thinking about thinking, one that relies on entanglement rather than linear or parallel sequencing to explain cognition? The closest thing to that I'm aware of was proposed by Roger Penrose, of Black Hole fame, about 35 years ago, a theory called "orchestrated objective reduction." Penrose argues that the brain operates via quantum properties at the micro level—in complex and flexible organic structures called microtubules—and is, therefore, NOT analogous to the computing and information processing systems we now presume are potential brain-equivalents. His theory is highly disputed in AI, neuroscientific, and quantum mechanics communities based on evidence that entanglements decohere very quickly in macro systems that are not held in vacuums and/or super-cooled. The brain is warm and wet. Therefore, they argue, it simply cannot operate as a quantum system, so must be essentially classical in its operations. But there are still active proponents for this way of thinking looking for ways out of that pickle, and I'm rooting for them in the longer run. For two reasons. First, to work backwards analogically from mechanical to organic systems just seems stupid to me, classical mechanics gone haywire. But more importantly, Penrose, et al., are at least attempting to account for the obvious ability of the brain to produce/inhabit consciousness itself, which mechanical systems cannot; and, further, to enter those transcendent states of mind that humans have clearly experienced pretty much forever, the ones "surpassing understanding" that artificial systems are

incapable even of approaching let alone achieving. Grok still needs Elon Musk (of all people) to tell it to apologize for the hate speech he told it to generate. 'Nuf said about AI surpassing understanding. It can't even surpass Elon Musk!

It's possible that quantum computers will provide an avenue to reconcile artificial with actual intelligence, proving once and for all that the key to intelligence is quantum not classical. In the meantime, I want to go even further out on my limb. I made a lighthearted comparison above to entanglement as a sort of "love at first sight." What if a love, or some conceptual equivalent, is a fundamental property of our universe, a way of naming the force that powers its evolution teleologically? C.S. Pierce made a specific argument toward this end in the middle of the 19th century, in an essay called "Evolutionary Love." He named his theory "agapism," a synergistic interaction of what he called "synechism" (the continuity of space, time and law) and chance. That's at least the best sense I can make of his (typically) nearly impenetrable prose in this argument. And Jean-Baptiste Lamarck proposed a theory of evolution that advanced as much by generational heritability and epigenetic transformation as by natural selection, with an innate (continuous) drive toward complexity, which Pierce then argued was akin to his agapism. Both systems have, like the quantum brain, been discredited. Which is something other than to say they are entirely wrong. At the human level, this way of thinking may be able account for, among other things, the common perception that loved ones are, in fact, co-present with us non-locally; i.e., entangled, a genuinely quantum effect at the macro level. Can this be proved? Two choices: No or not yet. Take your pick. I prefer the latter.

And I'll go even further "out there" than that. I have certain kinds of experiences routinely at the macro level that in my opinion have all the elements of entanglement. When I walk in the forest, for example, I often make, or feel, intentional engagements with specific trees of which I am quite conscious, and, in my opinion,

they are as well. In those moments we become not two but one. And sometimes this opens a portal to network with a whole forest, ecstatic moments I've documented along the way. My poem "This Dark is Mine" in a previous post narrates one of those events. On an even stranger scale, I have had and written about real-life experiences in which specific trees came from a remote location to guide me through a difficult transition; and in which time was suspended while, I assume, I was being called elsewhere to provide similar guidance for someone or something else. "Huh?" perhaps, to you. "Wow!" for sure to me. I'll document both of these in detail in a future post, so you can decide for yourself then how much credibility you want to accord them. On a more pedestrian scale, I have had and written about what for me is akin to "falling in love" with things as mundane as manhole covers and the white lines on highways. I am absolutely certain all of these entanglements occurred. And my spirit has been enriched by its willingness to trust that they were true. Are these legitimate examples of macro-level entanglements? Not in the context of current theory. Are they therefore definitely not that? I prefer to say the jury is still out and may be for some while.

How might intimacies of this sort be conveyed through spacetime? In the classical paradigm, they simply can't be. But I think quantum field theory may provide a way forward. Current physics posits that at least 17 (and perhaps many more) discrete "fields" permeate the entirely of spacetime, providing the mechanisms for subatomic entities to emerge, gain mass, combine, interact, and entangle. In effect, all of spacetime is constantly abuzz with all these fields, each performing its bespoke task in the general scheme of things. What if consciousness itself is also a field that buzzes permanently through spacetime? And that, like subatomic particles in the matter-related fields, we inherit and inhabit it cosmically rather than produce it locally? Sound outlandish? Not to some of the founders of quantum mechanics. Max Planck, for example, who came up with the concept of quantum packets as foundational to the material

universe and the "constant" that bears his name, believed exactly that. "Consciousness," he said, is "fundamental" and "matter" is "derivative from consciousness," a secondary expression of a pre-existent universal mind. Erwin Schrödinger, my inspiration for this journey, believed much the same thing, that consciousness was not the product of individual brains but a foundational, pre-existing aspect of all reality, in effect, another "field" buzzing constantly everywhere. He stated, famously, that "the total number of minds in the universe is one!" Which is to say that consciousness belongs not only to "intelligent" beings like us, but to everything we see (and can't see) in the natural order of "things." So, at least two of the founders of quantum mechanics believed that consciousness was not produced by the organic brain but that the organic brain takes on consciousness from an extant field in much the same way that matter takes on mass from the Higgs field, a mode of panpsychism that is perfectly compatible with the non-dualist Eastern religious and philosophical systems, indigenous cultures, and early Christian heresies I've been channeling along the way here.

Even more recently, Federico Faggin, the inventor of the microprocessor, similarly argues that consciousness is a primary "field" in the quantum paradigm, not an emergent property of brains. In effect, for him, *all* the quantum fields are not only inherently conscious, they also possess free will (deriving from the probabilistic aspect of their operations, which I wrote about in an earlier post.) In other words, we, too, have "free will" (I hate those two terms, saturated as they are with the juices of the classical paradigm, but they're what we have right now to express this probabilism) built into us as foundational aspects of our being. And he is quite adamant that while AI may simulate intelligence more and more closely, it will never achieve consciousness, at least as long as it operates via binary switches. And, finally, he believed that the "purpose" of the universe is for consciousness to know itself, which I've argued both in these posts and in my books, often starting from philosophical/ spiritual

systems and migrating to quantum mechanics. Faggin, Planck and Schrödinger arrive at the same destination from the opposite direction. If you're willing to follow them that far, and I am, it changes everything in the ethical paradigm. Now, as a given, rather than via long, hard spiritual discipline, "all is one, one is all," my ongoing mantra. Hierarchy? Gone. Externally imposed orthodoxy? Gone. Authoritarian power? Gone. Patriarchy? Gone. That's a lot to gain from the simple substitution—entanglement for isolation—I started with. And all those out-of-the-ordinary human capacities and experiences I've inventoried, now considered anywhere from special, to weird, to aberrant, suddenly become the norm, exactly what, in the general scheme of "things" we have evolved to be and do.

If you migrate with me all the way over into this version of the quantum paradigm, longstanding arguments that have afflicted Western "lines of thought" about the relationship or lack of one between mind/spirit and matter/world suddenly evaporate into the nonsense they always were. These emerged well over three millennia ago, on the religious side, with the turn to monotheism (and an absent god) and were reconfigured by (absent *mind*-ed) Enlightenment thinkers on the scientific and philosophical sides. In both of those systems there is either no or little intercourse between inside and outside. One of the "problems" these systems invent is whether "reality" exists independent of or is produced by mind/consciousness. Among the Enlightenment thinkers, Kant started one way then shifted to the other; Spinoza went to one extreme; Berkeley went to the other. We inherited this confusion in almost every disciplinary system that organizes both our day-to-day and intellectual lives.

A persistent trope in this mess is whether we have a little, a lot, or no "free will," two terms, as I said, as nonsensical as the discursive system that generated them. The quantum paradigm simply short-circuits that conundrum. Another trope, common now in neuroscience, is the brain as either an "uploading" and/or

"downloading" processor. Again, the quantum paradigm short-circuits that conundrum. Another trope, popular in multiple arenas now, is the universe, including ourselves as experiencers, as a uniformly deterministic "hologram" projected like a video game from some vantage point at its perimeter. The quantum paradigm I've outlined may not be able to fully short-circuit this fantasy, but none of the thinkers I've mentioned, including Faggins, the most radical, would, I believe, endorse it. I could work all of this out in detail here, as I have in my head, but it would add way too many pages to an already overly-long post. Maybe I'll do all that in a future piece. In the meanwhile, I hope you'll be able to intuit how adding consciousness as a universal field in which we are entangled and subtracting it as an isolated mental faculty we somehow manufacture individually makes all of these machinations essentially irrelevant to understanding what it means for us, me, you, trees, rocks, planets, everything to be here instead of there, now instead of then, together instead of apart.

On a more quotidian social scale, even when I'm simply engaged in a genuine conversation with someone in front of me, if both of us are active listeners, I experience some kind of entanglement, as if a hybrid version of the two of us is being created in the space between us, our getting to see and know one another, and ourselves, in deep and revelatory ways, literally "on the same wavelength." That can occur in my living room or over vast distances via other kind of communication technology. And in my book *Rereading Poets: The Life of the Author* I propose that the same outcome can arise via active reading (a more specialized form of active listening), across wide gaps of historical time, a synergism of author and reader via which *both* come to "life" right here, right now, together. In the classical paradigm experiences of this sort range anywhere from counter-intuitive, to magical, to mystical, to preposterous, to lunacy. In a quantum paradigm, extrapolated to scale, they are all normal.

It's possible that I simply prefer this way of thinking about how the universe, including the human field I get to occupy, operates. But you have the same choice I have: Stick with the classical paradigm and remain isolated and in charge or follow Schrödinger all the way across into the quantum paradigm and be intimately and equitably entangled, always loving and loved. Quantum mechanics tells us quite clearly how reality emerges at the foundational level. Humans throughout history, especially outside of the Western tradition, almost uniformly intuited the whole of Being pretty much that way without the equipment to prove it or the math to decode it. I aspire to that kind of enlightenment instead of the Enlightenment "lines of thought" I've inherited culturally. And my spirit is willing still to do the work to fathom that "great blooming, buzzing confusion"—which is "all things fuse[d] that can fuse," the childlike state of mind both Jesus and Laozi say is essential to genuine enlightenment (see my June 11 post)—as deeply as my remaining time in this astonishing universe will allow.

## July 31: In the Spirit … of the sublime

Throughout my posts I've been using four terms to name the higher states of consciousness I and many others seek and crave—ecstatic, transcendent, sublime, ineffable—as if they are at least analogous if not interchangeable. They are not, of course, but I never really stopped to figure out how to arrange them in relation to the effects I'm interested in. A few days ago I decided to think that through, starting with "sublime," the most theorized among them historically, at least in my field. I've had an interest in that term ever since I read, in college, a little book called *On the Sublime* by someone called Longinus (whose real identity is a matter of dispute), writing probably (again not certain) in the first century CE. I know that the term ended up influencing not only the Romantic poets, especially Coleridge and Shelley, but also Romantic painters both on the flamboyant continental side (like Caspar David Friedrich and Théodore Géricault, e.g.) and on the more sedate English side (J.M.W. Turner and John Constable, e.g.) I've had many fascinating conversations over the years with my son about the application of that term to painting, his primary medium, both back then when it was almost *de rigueur* and since, as it morphs and goes in and out of favor. And I've taught *On the Sublime* a number of times in various seminars during my career. So, as Pound says at the beginning of his *Cantos*, I "set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea" to explore sublimity.

Spoiler alert: By a very circuitous route I finally concluded that my four terms were most useful for getting at what I'm trying to talk about not as equivalents, or even covalents, but as roughly sequential stages in the process that ultimately gets me where I want to go, which is up, up and away. I could cut right to the chase here and tell you what I concluded. And if you're impatient with my digressive habits as a writer, you can jump right now to the final two paragraphs. But where's the fun in that? At least for me, which is why I'm writing these pieces in the first place. So, between here and there I'm going to report on part of the process

of inquiry that solved a problem I wasn't even sure I had until I did all of this work.

It all started innocently enough when I ran across this little vignette in S.T. Coleridge's book *Shakespearean Criticism*, referring to something that occurred on one of his walking trips with the Wordsworths, William and Dorothy, this one in Scotland. He says:

> *I was one day admiring one of the falls of the Clyde; and ruminating upon what descriptive term could be most fitly applied to it, I came to the conclusion that the epithet "majestic" was the most appropriate. While I was still contemplating the scene, a gentleman and a lady came up, neither of whose faces bore much of the stamp of superior intelligence, and the first words the gentleman uttered were "It is very majestic." I was pleased to find such a confirmation of my opinion, and I complimented the spectator upon the choice of his epithet, saying that he had used the best word that could have been selected from our language "Yes, sir," replied the gentleman," I say it is very majestic: it is sublime, It is beautiful, it is grand, it is picturesque." — "Ay (added the lady), it is the prettiest thing I ever saw." I own that I was not a little disconcerted.*

This is so "Coleridge," the precision and extremity, all of it. I assumed, from things I already know, that his displeasure with them had something to do with "the sublime" as he would have understood it back then**.** So I figured I'd see where that led. My first Google search providentially turned up this passage from Dorothy Wordworth's *Journals* where she describes the same incident:

> *We sat upon a bench, placed for the sake of one of these views, whence we looked down upon the waterfall, and over the open country ... A lady and gentleman, more*

> *expeditious tourists than ourselves, came to the spot; they left us at the seat, and we found them again at another station above the Falls. Coleridge, who is always good-natured enough to enter into conversation with anybody whom he meets in his way, began to talk with the gentleman, who observed that it was a majestic waterfall. Coleridge was delighted with the accuracy of the epithet, particularly as he had been settling in his own mind the precise meaning of the words grand, majestic, sublime, etc., and had discussed the subject with William at some length the day before. "Yes, sir," says Coleridge, "it is a majestic waterfall." "Sublime and beautiful," replied his friend. Poor Coleridge could make no answer, and, not very desirous to continue the conversation, came to us and related the story, laughing heartily.*

What I like about her take is its generosity toward her friend. While Coleridge reports that he was "not a little disconcerted," (that "not a little …" is, again, so him), Dorothy uses the epithet "poor" affectionately and says he was "laughing heartily" as he "related the story," making him seem more jovial than aggravated. The discussion "at some length" that Dorothy reports between Coleridge and her brother the night before about "the meaning of the words grand, majestic, and sublime" is a classic example of their preoccupation about what words mean and do.

But it still begs the question: What happened in that interaction that was so off-putting or hilarious to him? Well, obviously it has something to do with the words used to describe the effect this scene had on these various observers. Coleridge first uses a process of "rumination" to winnow through the candidates he and Wordsworth had discussed the previous evening until he settles on "majestic." When the "gentleman" who "came up" inadvertently selects the same word, Coleridge is delighted both with him (for being so astute) and with himself (always enjoying external validation.) Until the man goes on to muddy the waters

considerably by giving a thesaurus full of synonyms, as if they are all equivalent, including one I'm sure Coleridge found particularly irritating: "beautiful" (for reasons that will become clear below.) When the "lady" chimed in with "the prettiest thing I ever saw," Coleridge's disdain for the pair of them was fully fledged.

Coleridge was of course a first-rate poet, a fastidious wordsmith of the highest order. He was also an aspiring philosopher, an equally fastidious wordsmith of a different and not always complementary kind. As he aged, the latter inclination seemed to become more and more dominant for him. When I read his *Biographia Literaria,* for example, I can't help but feel that he doesn't just want to be *like* Kant; he wants to *be* Kant, whose specific relevance to this matter will become evident below. So his finickiness about words and their definitions comes at this couple from both barrels, which for him were always fully loaded. I don't think either of them realized how fortunate they were, assuming they were not prepared to spend the rest of the day listening to Sam bedazzle them with rhetorical pyrotechnics, for which he was legendary. Here's a story (most likely apocryphal) about such an unwelcome conversation with his friend Charles Lamb:

> *Mr. [Charles] Knight's two volumes of autobiography [in The Spectator, vol. 3, July 23, 1864] remind us of the story told by Charles Lamb about Coleridge. Charles Lamb had paid a visit to the philosopher at Highgate, and, as usual, was detained in the garden by an eloquent peroration on some obscure point of metaphysics. To make sure of his friend, Coleridge seized him by the coat-button, delivering his grand monologue with closed eyes, legs firmly set, and his head thrown backward as if addressing the clouds. There seemed no escaping the terrible flow of eloquence, but Charles Lamb's ready wit suggested a means. He quietly took a penknife from his*

*pocket, cut the fatal button, and then made off in great haste to visit another friend at Highgate. Returning the same way, some hours later, he peeped in at Coleridge's garden gate, and—there stood the great metaphysician, exactly as he had left him, the button between his fingers, and the head thrown up into the sky. The soft flow of his silvery speech was pouring forth as melodiously as ever, without stop and without break.*

So, you get my point. Coleridge could, under the slightest provocation, become maddeningly garrulous, which this couple could not possibly have known.

I can see now that I've already used up a big chunk of my self-imposed Substack quota of pages, so I'll need to truncate my original plan (you're welcome!) I could cut the amusing Coleridge stories, but I like them. So instead of a full genealogy of how the concept of the sublime ended up at the center or Romantic poetics, and my head, I'll focus on how I imagine it and its synonyms were rattling around in Coleridge's head as he looked at those falls of the Clyde and engaged in that exchange with the couple doing likewise. Specifically, why Coleridge chose "majestic" over "sublime" to characterize his experience of that scene. And why the figgy pudding of other terms proffered by the couple perturbed him so much.

You do, though, need to know at least a little about what Longinus was up to and what the Romantics made of it to have an idea of what Coleridge was most likely thinking that day. Here are a few pertinent quotes from *On the Sublime* (or, in this case, from *On Great Writing,* G.M.A Grube's perfectly legitimate translation of the book's title, the edition I preferred to use in the latter years of my teaching career):

*"Great writing does not persuade; it takes the reader out of [her]self. . . [T]o be convinced is usually within our control whereas amazement is the result of an irresistible*

*force beyond the control of any audience. . . . [G]reatness . . . like a thunderbolt . . . carries all before it and reveals the writer's full power in a flash (4).*

*"Our soul is naturally uplifted by the truly great; we receive it as a joyous offering; we are filled with delight and pride as if we had ourselves created what we heard (10)."*

*"[A] most effective way of attaining [greatness] is provided by the imagination . . . [which] applies when ecstasy or passion makes you appear to see what you are describing and enables you to make your audience see it (24).*

*"For art at its best is mistaken for nature, and nature is successful when it contains hidden art (33)."*

*"In statues one seeks for the likeness of a [human figure], but in speech . . . for that which transcends humanity (49).*

Ecstasy, transcendence, a seamless fusion of writer and reader, etc. I think you can see why the sublime was so appealing to the Romantics and is to me! Longinus proffers a number of specific techniques and devices that can invoke such effects, chief among them on the linguistic side, his primary focus, figurative language. When I taught his book, I used the analogy of a rocket ship to suggest how, for Longinus, a piece of "great writing" was a vehicle that, if well-enough designed and crafted, could transport a reader right to the outer boundary of the medium from which it is made, those figures and images still held captive in the local provinces of our babbling biosphere. That boundary, in his view, is not a barrier but a threshold (which is the *-limen* part of sub-lime's etymology), where you can step outside the province of the medium that took you there and into the majesty of deep space to float weightlessly, silently, timelessly, the gravity of the diurnal

too weak to pull you down until you want or need to come home again. It takes a little courage to take that step, but the payoff is magnificent, an eternal here and now that is not parsed by grammar or syntax, those slaves of time we need for more mundane "communication" down here. There is no clear inside or outside. Just being. That's my take on Longinus; but it is not exactly how this term entered the discourse of Romanticism, which is what was guiding Coleridge's head that day.

It is possible that Coleridge had read Longinus' treatise, via Nicolas Boileau's 1674 translation into French, which is how the term sublime got insinuated into the artistic and philosophic discourse of the day. But certainly he would have been familiar with two major treatments of the topic that came along about a century later: Edmund Burke's "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful" (1757), in which he draws a hard line between the sublime and the beautiful; and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790), in which he niggles with Burke's distinction between sublimity and beauty and explores, via the former, what happens at reason's borderlines. Neither of these treatments is completely consonant with Longinus, who is interested almost exclusively in how language can induce sublime effects.

Burke, for example, mentions Longinus only once, passingly, and that reference disappears in later editions. His approach shifts the focus away from language and toward sensory experiences invoked by encounters with nature, which is the pivot that makes all of this applicable both to painting and to Coleridge standing there looking at those falls. Burke's method is essentially Aristotelian, specifically the "pity and fear" stuff from his *Poetics*, centering on the role of awe and terror in exciting the passions. He says:

> *The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully is Astonishment,*

> *and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror … No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear, being an apprehension of pain or death, operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too … Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime.*

Note that Burke shifts the focus from the maker to the beholder, specifically what happens psychologically when reason is exceeded or disabled by intense experience. For him, the sublime is "the strongest passion" and reason is its victim. The beautiful, by comparison, is weak, more akin to the prettiness the gentleman's companion sees when she looks at the falls. He says:

> *For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small . . . They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure; and however they may vary afterwards from the direct nature of their causes, yet these causes keep up an eternal distinction between them, a distinction never to be forgotten by any whose business is to affect the passions.*

I think you can start to see what's at the root of Coleridge's aggravation: The sublime and the beautiful are two entirely different things. To use those words interchangeably, as the gentleman does, to characterize the falls is a sign not just of inattention to the meaning of words, but to the meaning of intense experiences.

Kant is more conscious of Longinus as a source, but he, too, deviates from it quite drastically, specifically by insisting that the sublime is not invested in externals like art or natural phenomena,

but is entirely subjective, what happens in the mind when we encounter something that strains the limits of our rational faculties. Not a surprise: Basically, Kant does that with everything, and he takes a lot of words to do it, which always leaves me, at least, "not a little disconcerted." [For some reason, when Coleridge plays at being Kant, as in the *Biographia*, I find it charming. Maybe because I know he knows it can't get him where he really wants to go, as in the case with his famous definition of the Imagination, for which he has to exit Kant's regime entirely, and does in the most disarming way, that cautionary "letter from a friend" he invented to negotiate his slick move.]

Kant draws a distinction between the sublime and the beautiful that resemble Burke's: The experience of beauty is pleasurable, the sublime is at least partly unpleasurable because its extremity incites a feeling of fear about the loss of rationality. The application to the scene at the falls is simple: Coleridge, like Kant, wants to understand what's happening in his own head as he views the falls, ruminates on his reactions in order to select the exact word to describe them, and finds the less rigorous approach of the couple he encounters disconcerting (if you take his version) or hilarious (if you prefer Dorothy's.)

None of which explains why he chose "majestic" over "sublime," so I'll just have to speculate about that. The conversation the evening before may have gone something like this: "What should we make of a natural setting like these falls, one with proportions of this magnitude? Is it overwhelming enough to invoke a response we can call sublime? Probably not. Is it simply grand, a weaker, more mechanical response? No. Is it merely beautiful, that is absent awe? No. So how about majestic? Yes, a good compromise." And, following Burke and Kant, any response that defines majestic as, simultaneously, sublime, beautiful and grand, let alone picturesque (yuck!) or pretty (yikes!), is "by definition" inane.

In any case, here's the conclusion I promised at the outset: Those four terms I've been using relatively indiscriminately along my way here seem to me now to pertain more to a process than an event or a state of mind. To wit: When I witness something "sublime," could be a text, a work of art, or a natural scene, it provokes a condition of "ecstasy," a feeling of literally—from the Greek: *ek* (out)-*histanai* (cause to stand)—standing outside myself, which is how I know what made that happen was in fact sublime. From that untethered position, it is but a short step over the threshold into transcendence, which is not a mystical state of mind but a liberation from the diurnal media or scene that took me on that trip the limits of my mind. And where I end up, that's where the ineffable resides.

Parmenides, writing more than two millennia before Coleridge had his conversation with the couple overlooking the falls, describes a "trip" of that sort that opens this way:

> *The horses that take me to the ends of my mind*
> *were taking me now: the drivers had put me*
> *on the road to the Goddess, the manifest Way*
> *that leads the enlightened through every delusion.*

When he gets where those horses were taking him, the Goddess tells him the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about Being and Nothingness, and it's pretty stunning, rattles him down to his toes. I'm not saying that every time you step past the threshold to which language or math or art or nature take your mind's horses that you're going to find those kind of fireworks. Parmenides was a pretty unusual guy. And lucky, too, I guess, to have had this chariot of the gods come get him. But, hey, you might. Why not go for it, see what happens? The ineffable has many faces and moods, none of which can be directly rendered via the material media that are our currencies down here. Each of those things, when they are "great," can, though, get you up close. The rest is up to you.

**August 4: In the Spirit … of those three trees**

I alluded in an earlier post to an experience I had where, I claimed, trees came from a remote distance to be with me when I was "lost." This post will document that story in detail. You can decide for yourself how credible it sounds.

The essays that filled the first several books I wrote after I arrived in Olympia seven years ago were founded on my daily walks in the various temperate rain forests within a few miles of my house: Watershed Park, Woodard Bay, Eld Inlet, and Squaxin Park [which was called Priest Point until a couple of years ago, the change a gesture of very belated conciliation to a Native tribe cruelly abused for generations.] In the meanwhile, my books have gradually drifted away from that matrix, mostly unconsciously, toward other motive elements. But today I'm going to write a piece based on a walk I just came back from, this one in Squaxin Park a stretch of forest that starts in downtown Olympia and winds its way waterside up along Budd Bay toward Boston Harbor. I visited that park a number of times early on in my stay here, on the town side, and found it too busy for my taste. Then, a year or so later, I started walking from time to time at its upper end, about a mile outside of town, much more sedate, maybe an occasional dog-walker, more to my liking. I have come to love and visit that space more and more, at least in part because its complex web of intersecting pathways reminds me of Boyce Park back in Pittsburgh, the site for all the walks I document in *This Fall,* the first book I wrote after my wife died.

The mix of trees in all these forests is essentially the same. The basic species are Douglas firs, huge, stern-looking monoliths with bark like deeply furrowed fields, trees that take weeks or months to welcome you into their spaces; red cedars, tapered trunks sweeping upward, fleshy needles, some low enough to be reachable, sensuous trees, very gracious; hemlocks, so graceful, droopy branches like long gowns, bark more neatly serrated, ballroom-dancing sociable;

red alders, tall white-mottled, smooth-barked trees, often growing in groves, their spar-like trunks all akimbo, sun-seeking, eternally cheerful; and big leaf maples, massive, wide-as-my-driveway trunks lumpy with softball-to-soccer ball sized dollops of bark protruding, pie-plate-wide leaves (thus the name), the queen-sages of every forest they inhabit, approachable, radiating timeless, wordless wisdom. At Woodard Bay, firs and alders predominate; at Watershed Park, hemlocks and cedars; at Eld inlet, firs and cedars. There are big leaf maples in each of these forests, many specimen-quality, just gigantic, I assume because they were heavily harvested for their beautiful wood back in the 19th and early 20th century, so those that survived are legitimate "old growth" size now. Squaxin Park is the only forest in which these amazing trees predominate, all ages and sizes, one of the reasons I so enjoy walking there now.

I'm writing this to complete a story that started back in Pittsburgh, in Boyce Park, several years before I left to come out here. And, as I said, to add some weight to the claim I made in my final quantum mechanics post about trees having come to visit me when I was lost, which I'm sure sounded pretty preposterous, like maybe I was on drugs, which I can assure you I wasn't, or was having mental health issues, which I can assure you I was, at least in the aftermath of my wife's death, though they did not affect my perceptual acuity. You still may not be willing to accede to my speculation about the potential reality of large-scale quantum events of the sort I described. But at least you'll know my openness to imagining them is based on substantial personal experience.

The story started one day in Boyce Park, back in 2015, during the month or so of walks that ended up as *This Fall,* the essays that document the first turbulent autumn after my wife died, my coming to terms with that loss in the place we had shared walks together for decades, just me then, trying to make sense of things, with only the trees to help me. The specific walk I'm interested in here occurred on November 20, a climactic moment in the process, as you can tell by the emotional extremity of this passage:

*There they were, dignified, invisible,*
*Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,*
*In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air . . .*

*These are some lines from the opening section of T.S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton," the first of his famous Four Quartets, the poem I mentioned in Essay 7. I have always had an ambivalent relationship with these late poems of Eliot's, so austere, so moving, yet, what? Something both too much and too little about them. So high on solemnity, yet so low on, well, life, haunted, past and future collapsing into a present that doesn't go anywhere, no legs to walk with. Right now, I cannot afford either of those luxuries, too high on solemnity, too low on life. I thought of these lines today as I headed up the first hill, all those trees just standing there, stripped bare now, straight up, stiff, like thick oars stuck into still waters, no hands to drive them, or tall spars carving up the sky, a growing chorus singing, praying, almost inaudibly, under breath to themselves at first, then, separately, to one another, whispers, out of cadence, I overhear as I enter their domain, until all together, in unison, louder: "Winter. We wait." They are arrayed all the way up the hill, as far as I can see, armadas of them, thousands, tens of thousands, maybe millions, every shade of gray between white and black blending in the distance to a tall wall of taupe, no leaves now to dress out their taut frames. All of them saying, one great wave: "Winter. We wait."*

*For the first mile or so I cried, intermittently, sometimes convulsively, seized up bodily not by pain but the idea of pain, pure, so great it takes over, shakes you*

*until*
*all*
*the tears*

*f*
*a*
*l*
*l*
*down*

Shortly thereafter, I somehow got "lost" on paths I had traversed thousands of times, knew like the back of my hand (which I know pretty well because I sit here typing with it every day.) Here's what I go on to say about that:

> *I took a scattered, switchback kind of walk today, willy-nilly, no plan. At one point I realized I had somehow doubled back on myself, the little bridge I had crossed about 10 minutes before now right down there again in front of me, on my left. I did not want to turn back, retrace the path. I hate turning back. And I did not want to keep going forward, over that bridge for the second time, just another form of turning back. So I headed up a steep bank through the brush, certain I would cross a familiar path sooner or later. I passed a group of great, tall trees, about as big as trees get in this woods, trees that have waited forever, year after year after year, 100 or more years, way more than I can even imagine, their bark, which I stopped to feel, thick as elephant skin, rough-textured, like huge, brown syrup drops frozen in layered cascades down their sides. They said quietly, with the slight smiles of those who know, down to the bones, that there is no way now to fight or flee: Winter. Wait. This is not negotiable. The survivors, these great trees, know this reality. I am listening to them, today, as I do every day, and I pay attention.*

That day I just assumed I had encountered an unfamiliar species of trees, one I had not seen before in these woods, or any other woods I ever walked in back East for that matter. But I never ran into them, or any other like them, again. About two years later, during my final winter in Pittsburgh, a dark, snow-inundated, flu-addled few months

of misery that left me fully depleted, I wrote my final Pittsburgh-based walk-centric book *Last Spring*. Here's how the story about those trees picks up there, on January 21, 2018:

> *It was even warmer today, upper 40s when I got to the woods, cloudy, heavy air. The soft snow on the path was now wet-slick from the melt, icy in spots, demanding attention step by step. There was an eerie fog hovering above the snow, maybe 20 feet deep up from the ground, visible to my right, down the hill, to my left, up the hill, and behind me when I looked back. But, oddly, the air ahead appeared clear. The effect of all of this was to distort space like an accordion, a kind of doppler effect, the trees behind and beside me seeming quite far apart, the ones in front of me crunched up together, foreshortening the path.*
>
> *Just after I took the dogleg down the path "less traveled" [I had talked about the day before] I noticed immediately something that surprised me: There was a set of boot prints, on the small side, a woman maybe, heading in the opposite direction I was walking, what I said yesterday was highly unlikely to happen given how this path abuts to the road. But there they were. So, later yesterday or earlier today, someone most likely saw the inscription I carved on that downed tree. I was not sure what to make of all this disruption of normalcy. But it got me thinking about some of the more unusual experiences I've had in these woods, things hard to explain in terms of Newtonian mechanics, sometimes even stretching the perimeter of quantum mechanics.*
>
> *One of them I mentioned briefly in <u>This Fall</u>, those huge, bulbous, old trees I ran into one day when I left the path and headed into the thickets after I got twisted around, then lost, on one my walks. There were, I remember vividly, both that day and now, three of them, much broader in circumference than the other trees around them, covered with what looked like huge globules of wax that had run down the trunks and hardened into bark. I actually put my arms around one of*

*them, just to be sure I wasn't making them up. What I didn't say in that essay is that I went home and Googled a variety of combinations of terms to try to find out what they were and came up empty. I've seen something like those surface lumps on some sycamore trees, much smaller, less runny-looking, but similar. But their bark was way rougher. And they were huge. There are no sycamores on or near any of the paths I walk on in Boyce Park. Or any in these woods that I know of. The tapering shape was reminiscent of an African baobab tree, but Boyce Park is not in Africa. So I just let it slide.*

*A few months later, about this time of winter, all the leaves down, ground all white, every single tree trunk visible for hundreds of yards ahead and around, I decided to go and find them again. I knew roughly where I had left the one path and roughly where I had connected up with the one above, so I headed that way. There was not one tree even remotely resembling the ones I saw and hugged either in appearance or size. So I started searching in widening circles, a space maybe a mile in diameter on the ground. Nothing. A few days later, I tried again, widened the circle. Again, nothing. Those trees are not there. I am certain of it. How and why they were there the day I found them is open to question. My self-explanation at the time was it was a very large-scale quantum effect, the kind no physicist would believe could happen. But that rationale satisfied me. I didn't mention this to others or in my book because it seemed pretty outlandish even by my standards. One day on a walk, though, I mentioned it to a good friend who shares my openness to mystery. And she said, immediately, "Oh, it must have been a quantum experience." I was stunned and thrilled that there was at least one other human being in the world willing to entertain that thought. So that's how it got settled, a quantum version of Christ's promise: "Where two or three gather in my name, there I am." And that is where those trees are! I could see all the trees in the woods today just like I did back then, over two years ago now; I made no further attempt to try to find the ones that*

*came that day to surprise and comfort me. I already know where they are and where they aren't.*

The story picks up again in my second walk-based book in Olympia, *A Mind of Winter*, on June 17, 2019, this way.

*As you know if you read my work, I inhabit time quite strangely, more like a sub-atomic particle sometimes, I think, than a human being. I have no idea why. In This Fall I describe an unusual encounter I had in Boyce Park in Pittsburgh, on a day I was deeply afflicted, ended up getting "lost" on paths I knew well. I wandered up into the woods to get back on track and saw three great trees, much larger than they should be in those woods, with strange shapes and features. I put my arms around one just to make sure it was real and I felt a great comfort come over me. I found my way that day. In Last Spring I describe my search to find them again, mid-winter, all the trees in plain sight for hundreds of yards around in every direction. I went to the spot I thought they should be and then gradually expanded my search in circles, maybe an hour or so, over two days. Those trees are not there, I am certain of that. I let it slide, attributing it to a very large-scale (impossibly large, I know enough about physics to know) "quantum anomaly."*

*A few weeks ago on a walk at [Squaxin Park], not one of my usual haunts, I realized (I had already seen this, but it hadn't sunk in in this way) that most of the big leaf maples here have exactly the same "globules" on their trunks that I saw on those trees that day in Boyce Park. Maybe . . . but, I thought, they don't have quite the same tapering-upward shape. Today, in Watershed Park, I looked at a cedar and saw that it did. Exactly. So it must have been some hybrid of those two trees that I saw in Boyce Park. I am certain of it. And I am certain, too, about why they came, at that moment, in my despair, locked in a time warp that never moved, to share with me their knowledge of a future, theirs and mine, here, if I could just "find my way."*

*Oddly, on my walk today I had a similar sense of temporal discombobulation. I decided to take my walk in the reverse direction from normal, as I did in Boyce Park four years ago, to save the most beautiful and enjoyable part for last. A few hundred yards in, a woman in her fifties, on the phone, passed me walking from the opposite direction, then a woman in her twenties, running, same thing. About 5 minutes later, by my time, they passed me again, same people, same direction. The circuit here is a mile and a half around. I walk slow, but no way they lapped me in five minutes. It was then that I started thinking about all of this, and before I knew it, I was back where I started, in minutes, it seemed. And I had no recollection of the part of the walk I had been so looking forward to. Most likely, I just got so distracted by my thoughts that I "missed" it all. But maybe, I prefer to think, like those trees, I had to go somewhere else for a while to comfort someone lost. I hope so. I am not lost now. I am here. My time may move strangely, but it moves. I've seen the trees that came to meet me. They are here, too. Someday, I hope, whomever I might have met today will be able to meet me again, when they're here instead of there.*

I include this final paragraph as evidence for the additional claim I made about something akin to time-travel, which may sound even more preposterous than the tree-travel thing. But in matters of this sort, I prefer to apply Occam's Razor (essentially, the least complicated solution is always the best) or Sherlock Holmes' famous rule ("When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth") to decide what I believe. We could, of course, haggle endlessly about those simple/best and impossible/improbable conundrums in these cases. But in my opinion, my "solutions" are both the simplest and truest explanations for things otherwise inexplicable.

All of which is to say that I am absolutely convinced now—even if you aren't or ever will be— that the three trees that consoled my on that grievous walk in Pittsburgh came from here, Squaxin Park. Trees

exactly like them are all over the place, and many of them, I know now, having paid close attention, have exactly the shape I remembered, pot-belly-squat at the bottom, tapering upward toward the crown. So there is no need to crossbreed them with cedars to believe in them. There are so many of them here I can't be sure which ones showed up. What I believe, with certainty, is they came that day, when I was lost, to intimate a path forward for me, toward my future, where I'd be walking one day once I got my life and head re-sorted again, years before moving to Olympia was even a glimmer in my imagination, almost like the converse of the famous "Field of Dreams" message: "If you come, we will build it." Today, every day I walk in Squaxin Park now, or anywhere else around here, I know in every fiber or my being that I and these amazing trees have built a home together. I'm so grateful for the wisdom and care those three came from here to there to share with me, and for all the trees that share their wisdom and care with me still. Quantum mechanics cannot account for anything even remotely resembling this on such a scale. But I can. And, like those late-fall trees I heard singing 10 years ago, winter on the way, I'm willing to wait as long as it takes to be proved right.

**August 8: In the Spirt … of quantum time**

As long as I'm trafficking in the "odd, strange and curious" (remember *Mad Magazine*: "What, me worry?"), I might as well test-flight the quantum theory of time I promised a couple of posts ago. If the last one, all that quantum-tree shenanigans, strained your credulity, best pass on this one. If you are open to a pretty radical alternative for the forced-march-forward tick-tock we're indoctrinated into via the "classical paradigm," then read on.

What follows here is a treatment of time more surreal, even, than those famous Dali paintings with melting clocks (a picture of one, "The Persistence of Memory," headed this essay.) Its central element is a "vision"—time as a "froth of bubbles"—I had on one of my walks in Boyce Park back in Pittsburgh in 2015. I wrote up a summary of it after I got home that day, put it up on my website, and then shared it in more extended versions in several of my books*: First, Summer* (2018), *Harvest: Essays on Time from Olympia* (2020), and *Willing Spirit* (2025), where it attracted neither attention nor response. So this will be its fifth, and I hope final, iteration. Then I'll just let it be. Give it time, maybe, to sink in somewhere besides inside my own head.

I've been preoccupied (I wouldn't say obsessed, more captivated) by time ever since I was a kid. When I started to read more widely into the physics of temporality, there was something deeply unsatisfying about what I found. In Newtonian mechanics, as I've said, time's passage is measured by a universal clock ticking at the same pace everywhere, going always and only "forward," a directionality mandated by entropy, the inevitable tendency of physical systems to move from more ordered to less ordered states. The standard figure for indicating that directionality is the "arrow of time," one way, forward only, that's it, even though any number of Newtonian equations leave open the possibility, mathematically, for what is called "time-reversal symmetry."

The problem became even more vexed in the 20th century: first when Einstein demonstrated that time was not universally constant but relative to frames of reference, which means, in practical terms, it flows faster or slower depending on where you came from and are going and how fast you're moving; then with quantum mechanics, where the movement of time tends to be (1) ignored (in favor of the Newtonian model, for simplicity's sake); or (2) treated either as an emergent property of quantum systems (where the "collapse" of the wave function" replaces entropy to enforce a forward-only arrow of time), or an illusion produced by consciousness. The books on time by the current "stars" of quantum theory take 2-3 hundred pages to say little more than that, all of which sounds more like punting than theorizing to me.

In any case, I had time on my mind when I started my walk that day a decade ago. The main thing I want to call attention to in this re-telling is the "arrow of time" business, specifically that in my system it is possible to imagine time moving either the opposite way, from the future toward the past, or recursively, back and forth in the present. I've never been able to find a philosopher or physicist who proposed, or even hinted toward, a model of that sort. But, as I said in an earlier post: "Just because you're the only one saying something, doesn't mean you're wrong. You may just be saying it in the wrong place or at the wrong time. So move or wait." In this case, I waited.

A few months ago that wait paid off when I ran across an article by Lee Smolin and Clelia Verde called "The Quantum Mechanics of the Present" (published in *Quantum Physics,* 2021) that supports at least some of the features of my admittedly exotic metaphor. They say:

> *Inspired by suggestions of Heisenberg, Schrodinger and Dyson that the past can't be described in terms of wavefunctions and operators, so that the uncertainty principle does not apply to past events, we propose that the distinction between past, present and future is derivative of the fundamental distinction between indefinite and definite.*

> *The same is the case for the quantum world versus classical world distinction of the Copenhagen interpretation. We then outline a novel form of presentism based on a phenomenology of events, where an event is defined as an instance of transition between indefinite and definite. Neither the past nor the future fully exist, but for different reasons. We finally suggest reformulating physics in terms of a new class of time coordinates in which the present time of a future event measures a countdown to the present moment in which that event will happen* (underline mine.)

So, they propose replacing the longstanding tradition of separating future from past via wave functions and operators (which leave things fixed in some version of "the block universe," where all of time pre-exists in a finished form, our perception of it "moving" merely an illusion) with a distinction between the definite (the past) and the indefinite (present and future), the latter two of which are subject to quantum uncertainty, and therefore probabilistic; the former (the past) is fixed, therefore classical in nature. And future events may "countdown to the present moment" rather than the past "counting up" to the future.

They go on to say, more technically:

> *Suppose we start out in a present moment T1 which is before T0, i.e. the present moment indicated by T = T0 is then in our future. In terms of clock time, T0 remains fixed in the future, and our clock increases, which gives a sense that we are rushing towards that future (isn't that how it often feels?)*
>
> *When we . . . transform to the τ coordinate [their preferred alternative for measuring the passage of time] it is like transforming to a moving frame, to capture the idea that inertial observers feel no motion. The present moment*

*coordinate starts in the past of that present moment, and sits stationary at* $\tau = 0$ *, while the future rushes towards it.*

*It is instructive to imagine what it would be like to live in a world that ran on present moment time; the present time would always be* $\tau = 0$ *. We wouldn't need clocks to tell us that the present moment would always be NOW. But the times assigned to future events would not be static, as they would always be counting down to the particular present moment when they would "happen" and emerge from the indefinite to the definite. Rather than living by a clock which always ran, to orient ourselves to a static calendar, the calendar would indicate a complexity of countdowns, each evolving towards its moment* (underlines mine.)

In other words, the present is a sort of creative interim where multiple indefinite (probabilistic) futures are processed into one definite past. Time is no longer illusory and some degree of agency ("free will" in the classical paradigm) is conserved. All of which makes what follows here, at least according to these two quantum theorists, nowhere near as preposterous-sounding as I'm sure it would have seemed to the physicists whose books I was reading back then. Here's what I wrote after my walk back in 2015:

*I have always been skeptical about the "infinite alternate universe" aspect of both the Multiverse and Many Worlds hypotheses, which implicate temporality as a secondary element to solve certain problems endemic to quantum mechanics. The former posits a potentially infinite array of alternate universes (each with, perhaps, different laws of physics) existing spatially as "bubbles" of sorts in some contiguous or non-contiguous relationship with our own. The latter posits an ongoing multiplication of alternate universes, complete in every detail, that branch off at each measurement juncture, equally real versions of the event-result following alternate paths, "worlds" (many with*

*“me” in them, of course) multiplying exponentially over time. I (prefer to) think that the universe is more elegant than this. Still, there is so much theoretical framing for something of this sort (inflation, gravitational waves, quantum duality, string theory, etc.), it is equally unlikely that the old standard model (one lifeline, one path, that's it) is adequately explanatory.*

*So I was walking in the woods today trying to fathom exactly what was wrong with these models and this thought came to me: they both depend on that unilinear “arrow” of time, the past always and only pressing into the future, the arrowhead of the vector of time locked in at the present moment, the “shaft” of the past trailing behind, fully formed, forcing the projectile forward, the future essentially empty, a blank slate waiting to be pierced. This way of construing time has seemed naive to me ever since I was a kid, frankly, and more and more so as I think and read more about temporality in general.*

*Time, I had already come to believe, is a fluid field, analogous to the fields that orchestrate quantum interactions in the physical realm, the future already extant amorphously, not as a “frozen river” [a metaphor derived from something Einstein said, now the “block universe”] but as something like potential energy, and it approaches us, actually comes toward us, in a generally amicable way, as we (among which I’d include not only all conscious beings but all materially “present” entities in our universe) encounter it, occupy it presently. In other words, the future is just as real as the past, though it remains immaterialized until we inhabit it.*

*The image that came to me to capture this ongoing creative interaction, at least as it pertains to infinite alternatives, was a wave tipped with a froth of bubbles as it slips toward "shore," the present. All of the bubbles, seen as a whole, are relatively undifferentiated, like a froth is,*

*rather than singular, like the ones we might blow in the backyard. Each individual bubble pre-constitutes a futural space with the potential for life, but it remains indeterminate, "empty," until we interact with it, filling it with life, realizing it in time. As we cross into that froth, we engage only a small number of those bubbles, of course, and these are activated. As a consequence, a certain number of other bubbles on that wave and successive incoming waves become viable for life, waiting for us, full of their potential, and a huge number of others become untenable, unlivable, dead; these pop, done, gone. Only one life goes on, though it still has infinite alternatives available to it in the future that approaches it. Time in this model has certain aspects of the superpositional qualities quantum mechanics attributes to space, the future approaching, past moving forward, back and forth, the present the "field" of their interaction. In other words, time contains, futurally, an infinite inventory of possible worlds which are winnowed down when we encounter them as they approach from the future, rather than generated as we ride the arrow of time out of the past. By this means, the realized universe becomes simpler rather than more complex over time, which relieves the oppression of determinacy from temporal sequence without rescinding it entirely*

. . ..

*About a month later, on another walk, it struck me that this could also account for one of the other conundrums that has long afflicted my thinking: What part of our lifeline is a matter of choice, responsive to our desires, controllable—the clunky "free will" trope that has afflicted Western thinking for centuries now; and what part is a matter of "fate" or, my preferred word, "destiny," essentially out of my control, even if not entirely pre-determined. I do believe that agency, some degree of*

*choice is foundational to the human experience, organizes our ways of being in the world. But I also believe, based on my experiences, that certain paths, events, whatever, are pre-cast, obligatory, insist on happening or not happening no matter how hard I might try (have tried!) to avoid or achieve them.*

*The frothy wave accounts for that in this way: Many, maybe most, of the waves we interact with are relatively mild, yielding to our intentions, letting us choose, more or less, the "bubbles" we prefer to interact with and enliven. Others, come at odd angles, surprise us, are beyond our control, like the sort of extrinsic historical or cultural or physical forces that are non-negotiable, belong to the time period, the body and the natural environments we are, for whatever reason, compelled to inhabit. These enliven what I'll call "accidental" bubble chains, compelling us to "live" in and through them whether we like it or not. Many of the major events/changes in my own life seem to have been inescapable in this way. They just had to happen, for whatever reason. And, of course, everything in nature is subject to a variety of "catastrophic" events beyond any prospect of choice or control. This is what I call destiny. All three of these can be accounted for, interactively, in the froth.*

My theory of time is almost certainly math-resistant; which may make it eligible for Wolfgang Pauli's famous diss of a theory he felt was entirely unsatisfactory: "It's not right. It's not even wrong!" My simplest defense would be that the currently accepted alternative, the rigorous and exclusive forward orientation of the arrow of time, is founded more on intuitional and cultural preconceptions than mathematics. Many equations in both classical and quantum mechanics can operate bi-directionally in time. We just don't apply them that way because we have committed ourselves unreflectively to that one-way arrow. No arrow in our experience comes toward us when we release the bow string, or has a pointy head at both ends

and wavers back and forth in space, so we believe no arrow can exist in such a weird superpositional state. Quantum mechanics has proved over and over again that weird often wins.

Which gets me to a larger point I want to make in this iteration of my retelling: that "reality" in this universe may well be constructed in such a way that there will always be aspects of it that elude the full grasp of our figurative modes of representation. That doesn't mean we can't think about those elusive manifestations deeply. Quantum mechanics is now over a hundred years in the making. It continues to provoke fundamental and currently irresolvable disputes about how reality operates, why it operates that way, even *what*, or *if*, it *is*. As I said in my very first post, quoting from *Willing Spirit:*

> *Those are big questions, the kind that meander sooner or later past the boundary between what is known with confidence and what is speculative, the province of philosophy; what is presumed to be knowable and what is not, the province of spirituality*. . . .
>
> *Every discipline has at least some practitioners who seek to move beyond received orthodoxy and toward some experience of the unfathomable "mystery" their preferred system implies or points toward. They want not just knowledge but enlightenment*. . ..
>
> *But to reach the source, the origin, one must exit symbolic systems and enter a state of direct perception or unmediated experience, those places where words and numbers fall silent*. (76-77)

Every spiritual system I'm aware of has a preferred pathway toward that sort of esoteric knowledge, what I'll call generically the "godliness" of reality. Those who pursue it do so via practices that follow two general methods: One gradually subtracts everything

ungodly from the equation until what's left is a dark-absence that is awesome; the other gradually adds everything godly to the equation until what's there is a light-presence that is awesome.

Western spiritual systems are generally monotheistic and presume that God is extant from the rest of what is; so they tend to proceed via subtraction. Hermetic (occult), Gnostic (heretical), Hesychastic (Eastern Orthodox), and Roman Catholic (contemplative) approaches all follow paths of that sort: They seek the godhead by venturing deeper and deeper inward, eliminating as much as possible that is without godliness until they arrive at a darkness beyond understanding. Indigenous spiritual systems are generally animistic and presume that God is immanent everywhere; so they tend to proceed via addition. Celtic, Aboriginal, and Native/Meso-American cultures prefer paths of that sort: They seek the godhead by venturing further and further outward, accumulating as much as possible that is saturated with godliness until they arrive at a brightness beyond understanding. Eastern spiritual systems tend to split the difference, some tipping toward subtraction (Zen Buddhism, for example), some addition (Daoism and Hinduism, for example): They seek the godhead by orchestrating a balanced relationship between inward-focused meditation and outward-focused witnessing, one guiding the other, light and dark, yang and yin, interwoven into a god-equivalent. I make no judgments about the relative merits of any of them. In my view, they all share the same aspiration: to know what is apparently unknowable.

The classical paradigm in physics, like Athena born fully formed from the head of Zeus, emerged relatively quickly and wholistically. The quantum paradigm on the other hand has emerged much more haltingly, often piecemeal, and via a means such that, a century on now, many of its most fundamental "problems"—the ones that pertain more to how and why things work the way they do than to what kinds of work those things can do for us technologically—remain unsettled. Which tells me that whatever level of understanding we achieve, there may always be another mysterious layer of "reality" just beyond it, awaiting study, one that appears at

first unfathomable and whose mechanisms might take anywhere from a generation to a century to forever to unmask, the mythical "theory of everything" eternally elusive, always futural, the pursuit of which may itself be an intrinsic feature of time in the human universe.

The process by which this advancement takes place often relies on sudden, out of the box, imaginative insights, more like revelatory leaps than incremental steps, our conventional way of construing progress in the hard sciences. Which means that the longstanding provincial cell-walls between physics and philosophy, mathematics and poetics, science and spirituality are becoming more and more permeable. There is a legitimate place in these inquiries for non-expert eyes to proffer what they see in the hopes it might be useful. I try my best to trust mine and suggest that you trust yours, too, even when what they see seems counterintuitive, unverifiable, even outlandish. Maybe especially so in those cases: Just because you're the only one seeing something, doesn't mean it's not there.

. . .

PS: I didn't have the space here to outline the practical, everyday effects of shifting to a quantum perspective on time (as I did with my other quantum-ethics posts.) But I will say this: Aside from the few people who have truly loved me, I don't believe anything has made my life easier, happier, and more livable than thinking that time is flowing toward me, friendly, fulsome and generous, rather than stalking me from behind, flogging me forward. If you want a more detailed unpacking of that generalization in a practical, workplace setting, you can listen to the last talk I gave at Pitt before I retired, called "All the Time in the World." It explains how this works for me, including an analysis of Coleridge's vision of time which amazingly (or not!) shares some essential elements with mine. It takes 20 minutes, but if you're looking for a way out of the temporal squirrel cage we are indoctrinated into, it may be time well-spent. Here is a link to both an Mp3 and text version of that talk: **https://paulkameen.com/?page_id=1458**

## August 10: In the Spirit … of learning to see the water

Prefatory note: I'm posting this next piece even faster than my usual way-too-soon (sorry about that: that's just how I write when I'm writing, which I'm not now, except for this: see the next paragraph), and to cleanse the palette after the last (unpleasant-tasting for some) post on quantum time (sorry about that, too: that's about as far out I ever get, and I'm back now.)

I'll be closing down this Substack in about a week. Those of you with a backlog can work through whatever parts of it appeal to you at your leisure without the constant harassment of more emails. I have two more posts (after this one), both written and ready to go. I'll explain the whys and wherefores of my ending this way in the last of them. But, in brief, I am a binge-writer. When I start writing, I rarely know why, or wherefore I'm headed. I just keep writing until it stops, which it did about a week ago. The process invariably takes about three months, in this case my ongoing "summer vacation" on Substack. Last Sunday, after months of walking past my guitar as if it didn't exist, I couldn't resist picking it up again. That's the sign for me: My head will be pleasantly empty for a while (this kind of writing take a lot out of me) and, like the bluebirds in my final "Morning Song" poem I can just "sit around and sing" until my head and heart are healed from whatever all that writing dredged up. So, without further ado (which in this case is also *adieu*) here is something I hope you will find more palatable:

. . .

*Greetings parents and congratulations to Kenyon's graduating class of 2005. There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes "What the hell is water?"*

David Foster Wallace

*The fireman told himself a lot more garbage of this nature. Then he told himself some true things.*

Donald Barthelme

My first epigraph is the opening of David Foster Wallace's famous commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005, a defense of liberal education, of a certain kind of critical thinking, and, ultimately, of a conception of truth, or at least a set of values that make telling oneself "some true things" more likely, all of which tend to fall by the wayside in real time in the real world, in part because "the water" we swim in is always being made invisible by forces so much larger and more powerful than our eyes, until, as Wallace says, we have "gone dead, unconscious in the head," acceding to the currently in-vogue "default settings" for "worship" that gradually erode our instinctive yearning for "love and fellowship and mystical things deep down," replacing it on the negative side with things like greed, but more importantly by disabling positive inclinations, like compassion.

The second epigraph is from Barthelme's 1972 story "A Man," about a fireman, who, because of an injury, can no longer fight fires and must find another life. I chose it because of the stark way it highlights the difference between "garbage" and "truth," one that has been gradually eroded by such a vast array of cultural forces it

is now not only difficult to discern one from the other but allows the former to masquerade persuasively as the latter. If you have ever, of necessity, had to remake yourself or your life, you know how vivid and vexed that distinction suddenly becomes. And, over time, you do actually begin to see the water you've been swimming in, not necessarily because you want to, but because you have to in order to make your transition, to survive.

One example of this aqueous obfuscation and the confusion it creates is the current state of affairs in our national body politic, longstanding traditions and institutions unraveling right before our eyes, all three branches of government reading chorally from the same perverse script, no one up there powerful enough to put a stop to it, or courageous enough even to try. I personally believe that democracy (I had "our" in there originally, but I think the matter is much more general than that at this point)—the kind founded on liberal education and critical thinking, the things Wallace is endorsing—will survive the current administration, severely hobbled, yes, but still alive in spirit, deep down, enough so for it to be rebuilt generationally. I understand why most people I say that to consider me hopelessly naïve. In retrospect (I mean like 20-30 years, "history book" time) I think Donald Trump's greatest achievement will be seen as his ability to persuade half the electorate (which is a surprisingly small percentage of the total population) that his so-often outlandish "garbage of this nature" lies were in "in fact" "true things." By implication, this means the same cohort will have been persuaded, necessarily, that longstanding and venerable true things are "in fact" garbage. I include, and put in quotations, "in fact" to emphasize that even the most obvious perceptions of our eyes and ears become vulnerable under such a mendacious regime.

Disappearing the waters in exactly this way is the most essential "trick" you must master to create a cult of personality, whether in the political, religious, economic, or intellectual arenas (all of which I've witnessed in my lifetime), gaslighting on an industrial

scale. I say cult of personality, though I could simply say "cult." All cults are cults of personality, the right combination of personal narcissism, megalomania, and cruelty brought to bear on the right people, primed by fear and grievances (the darker forces that the Roman "bread and circuses" were designed to both feed and defuse), at the right historical moment, one of uncertainty (which one isn't?) Once that mass-mania passes, it seems hard to understand how it could possibly have happened. But if you study history it seems hard to believe that it ever *doesn't* happen, given how vulnerable fearful people (which is most people most of the time in cultures like ours) are to assertions of power (which are inevitable in systems, like ours, that valorize hierarchy and accord way out of proportion advantages to those in the top tier), even when those assertions hurt them grievously. History is rife with cults of personality running things into the ground here and there, over and over, brief interludes of "WTF were we thinking?" in between.

One of the harder lessons to learn as a writer is just because you enjoy writing it doesn't mean others will enjoy reading it (see my prefatory note up top.) Likewise, one of the harder lessons to learn as a scholar is just because you enjoy coming to know it doesn't mean others will enjoy coming to know it. The bulk of what follows here is a takeaway from both those learning processes, a trove of material I extracted from my post a while back about James Wright's bluejay, primarily because I didn't think most readers would enjoy it in that context. I'm proffering it here because this newer context may highlight its value more clearly. Or not. You'll decide that very quickly once you get into the next section, which documents the career outlines of the major "confessional" poets I mentioned in that previous post.

In part because of my work as a reviewer back in the 70s, in part just because I'm interested in poetic genealogies of this sort, I've spent a lot of time over the years trying to figure out how poetic careers evolve in the context of, and sometime with resistance to,

the dominant critical ideologies of their moment. Critical ideologies are like every other subsystem the "spirit" of an age comprises. They are not optional. You simply have to live with or against the one you're born into to the best of your ability. It is the water you're swimming in, so it is both inescapable and difficult to see clearly. If what you want to do happens to fit neatly into that eco-system, you'll do swimmingly. If it doesn't, you'll struggle to stay afloat, maybe even drown. History is in some respects the record of those two kinds of fates, as seen in retrospect. That's one of the reasons I find a deep study of history so invaluable.

If, like me, you want to see your own water more clearly, there are two primary ways to do that: (1) Immerse yourself in it as completely as you can, the kind of in-depth critical work that a writer enjoys even if others don't. (2) Swim to some other pool outside yours and, from there, look back at the one you came from, the kind of in-depth historical work a scholar enjoys even if others don't. The analogy I use to illustrate the efficacy of (2) over (1) is the Archimedean lever: If your fulcrum point is right on top of the rock you want to move, it doesn't matter how long your lever is, you're not going to see what's under it. If your fulcrum point is at a distance, your lever has greater purchase and you can. In the spirit of that work, which I have enjoyed, I proffer the more detailed commentaries on the careers of the major confessional writers I alluded to more passingly in that original post, which you can peruse, or not, at your discretion. If you decide to pass, you can skip to my conclusion (the four paragraphs that begin right after "Yes, not. Really!"), where I give a more full-bodied endorsement for doing this kind of work.

. . .

Most of the confessionals (except for Anne Sexton) began their writing careers as late-stage modernists. Robert Lowell's early mentors were Alan Tate and John Crowe Ransom, prototypical second-gen New Critics, modernist to the core. In his first two

books—*Land of Unlikeness (1944)*, and *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946)—Lowell sounds a lot like his mentors. His third book, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951), is his attempt at a "long poem," a modernist trope for a seasoned poet. Even *Life Studies* (1959), Lowell's dramatic departure from that tradition, is radically new only in some of its parts and elements: the prose autobiographical narrative and the final section of poems from which the book derives its title. Lowell's gift for congested word-clots to convey mental disorder can itself be seen as an extension of the modernist tendency toward extreme verbal compression. His subsequent books, from *For the Union Dead* (1964) through *Day by Day* (1977*)*, lack the electric verve of *Life Studies,* at least to my ear. None of which it to underestimate the explosive intensity of that book. While I would not go as far as Stanely Kunitz did and call it "perhaps the most influential book of modern verse since T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land,*" I would say it was a moment for Lowell, and then for "intellectual" poetry in the latter-20th century (i.e., poetry *not* in what W.C. Williams called "the American grain"), to escape once and for all from the long, oppressive shadow Eliot (or at least what was made of Eliot by the literary-critical-complex) had cast. And it added a whole new down and dirty dimension to what was eligible material for a poem.

John Berryman's career mirrors Lowell's in those general respects. His first book—*The Dispossessed* (1948)—is derivative from Yeats, who, Berryman said, he "didn't want to be *like*," he "wanted to *be.*" *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956) is a foray into the "long poem" mode, much like Lowell's *Mills*. His *77 Dream Songs* (1964) is another story altogether. These poems are electric, astonishingly original, akin to Lowell's *Life Studies* poems in that respect, though much more rambunctious and flamboyant. Berryman creates a style, a voice, and a persona that are intentionally, disturbingly, offensively transgressive, stylistically, culturally, sexually, and racially. The series is founded in suicide (his father's), racked with other deaths (of colleagues and friends), mental disturbance (of "Henry," his thinly veiled alter-ego here),

and various despairs (the whole culture of that moment), simultaneously grim and riotous, not an easy combination to archive into language. This first volume (which won him a Pulitzer in 1965) of what became an ongoing project is simply stunning. He continued to write "dream songs" for five more years, eventually publishing the full collection in 1969, over 300 of them. These later additions, to my way of reading at least, are much less exhilarating, often dirge-like, some even boring, peppered with mournful multi-poem elegies for lost colleagues and friends and his own "plights and gripes." This is a good example of the conundrum any poet faces once they have achieved relative "fame," something Berryman coveted: You have to keep writing, even when the spark is not quite there. I have no problem with that. No one in any profession can be at the top of their game always and forever. And, you never know, what seems at first like dross may in time be celebrated as gold. See Whitman in that regard. Except for the "Eleven Addresses to the Lord" in *Love and Fame* (1970), poems of humility and delicacy (in the midst of others that make "love and fame" sound more like "sex and notoriety," for both of which Berryman had a prodigious appetite, more like addictions than aspirations, and which, along with alcohol, ruined his health and made his life untenable), his career never returned to its mid-60s zenith.

Sylvia Plath is a generation younger than Lowell and Berryman, and her career was considerably more foreshortened. Her first book, *The Colossus* (1960*)*, has a modernist veneer, animated by a sort of Dylan-Thomas-esque (one of her heroes) quasi-surrealism. *Ariel* (published posthumously in 1965) is in a different register and league altogether, simply astonishing poems, austere and roiling, fierce and depressing, all at the same time, a *tour de force* of verbal ingenuity in the face of mental disintegration. One of Plath's most unique gifts (to me) was inverting the animate with the inanimate at the level of poetic figures—I mean people, including her child and herself, mirrored primarily through lifeless things, and lifeless things depicted as scarily alive. "The Tulips,"

the poem I mentioned in that earlier post, is a master-class in this technique, which was, of course, more than a technique for her. It was the state of her mind as she composed these poems: empty and austere inside, the outside garish and fearsome. Her multiple suicide attempts, including the final, dramatic one, and her prose book *The Bell Jar* (1963), which was *de rigueur* reading for adolescents back in the sixties, turned her into a celebrity. Unfortunately, she was dead before all this happened. I have no way of knowing whether this sort of cultural glamour would have made her life more or less livable. It's hard to tell with poets, when the "live fast and die young" trope gains purchase, as it did in the off-the-rails culture of the 1960s. Scary. I was there. Take my word for it.

Anne Sexton is the one among these who, to my ear, owes the least debt to the New Critical juggernaut, much to her advantage from my point of view, though not to the *literati* of the moment back then. From her inaugural book—*To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960)—to her epitaph—*The Awful Rowing Toward God* (published posthumously in 1975*)*—her first-hand experiences with death and mental instability are unredacted, the only exception an amazing book of sort-of fractured fairy tales called *Transformations* (1971), one of my favorite books of that era, or any era for that matter. And her unabashed expression of female embodiment made her both *avant-garde* and scandalous from the outset. James Dickey, for example, found those "aspects of [female] bodily experience" in her work—e.g., menstruation, masturbation, sexuality in general—to be "pathetic and disgusting" in his review of her second book, a review that went downhill from there, one she apparently carried with her, motivationally, for the rest of her career! Sexton was, of course, one of the motive forces for making the female body as pertinent to poetry as male bodies had always been, which served as an inspiration for women writers in general, leveling the field. Within a generation, this notoriously male dominated "profession" was radically re-gendered, female poets moving from a fringe of outliers to the dominant cohort

among the major figures of the last third of the 20th century. Plath helped with this, of course, as did Adrienne Rich, Lucille Clifton, Audre Lord, Maxine Kumin, Denise Levertov, and Maya Angelou, among many others of that generation, along with the recovery of earlier female poets like Emily Dickinson, H.D. and Elizabeth Bishop. But the fact that Sexton was not as pre-formed by the patriarchal order of New Critical poetics made her especially useful as a role model. In other words, Dickey was as off kilter about that as he was about most everything else he did, a power to be reckoned with in his own time now pretty much dismissed as a poet with "mechanical" skills writing the "clever, supercilious crap" he attributed, wrongly, to Sexton. Sexton's response to Dickey's misogynism was spot-on, kind of hilarious. In a 1966 letter to him she wrote:

> *Maybe we will meet in Baltimore. I know we won't sleep with each other* [which seemed to be Dickey's idea of a solution to their feud]. *I know we ought to be friends . . . and being friends isn't as intellectual as You think. It can't be for I have hardly a brain in me head and yet still I've got tenderness. I think tenderness can include touch—just shouldn't mix it up with sexuality. One need not. Really!*

Yes, not. Really!

. . .

So, those of you who have read (or jumped) this far might still be wondering: What's the point? All of these writers shared a good part of the temporal span of your own lifeline. What can you possibly see from there that you can't see from here? Yes, that's so, but they did NOT inhabit the ideological waters I had to swim in, the various postmodernisms that first floated ashore from across the pond in the 70s and early 80s, followed by all the post-post-post-modernisms they spawned, giving a whole new meaning to the concept of "destabilization," which transformed what for the

most sensitive souls in the 60s was a hard-earned nervous breakdown into a debilitating anxiety disorder afflicting almost all of us almost all the time. What is visible from back there for me is how we wasted the moral force that animated the 60s to serve a gradual reboot of "the gilded age" that preceded WWI, the mega-wealthy preying on everyone else to line their larders; how we wasted the nascent sense of communal action that was in the air then to serve a phalanx of fatuous powermongers, some monied, some elite, some just chronically pissed and wanting to take it out on anyone further down the pecking order; and, most grievously, how we disabled "truth" as a viable concept for assessing the relative worth of competing ideas or opinions, leading to the current cornucopia of contemporary media, where you select the outlet already in your own echo chamber to deliver your take-out junk-food day after day—more propaganda than news— instead of walking around the neighborhood to see what else might be on the menu, a prerequisite for actual thinking. Because I spent my time early on first to notice and then go back to that relatively nearby vantage point, the water I had to swim in was visible to me throughout my career, for better or worse, if only because, from that vantage point, it appeared so much more obviously polluted.

Want to see more? Go back to the moments in the aftermath of WWI, all those early modernist writers, painters, artists, thinkers yearning earnestly for a cultural blueprint capable of reshaping the rubble in piles all over Europe into something "next and new." There is a hope, if not a faith, that animates their projects, even the grimmest ones, like Eliot's "The Waste Land," those lost souls not just waiting for but actually believing the fisher king can return to bring life back to the land. Or, almost a generation later, Picasso's "Guernica," his response to the fascist bombing of that Basque town during the Spanish Civil War, a cry from the dark full of both ferocity and compassion, two things in short supply these days, at least in tandem, which is the only way they'll do much good in times of crisis, like ours. Yes, their failure, despite their best efforts, set the stage for the gradual disillusionment, and then

dissolution of all the poets I wrote about above, the ones who inaugurated me into my adult life as "a creative individual." But their aspirations were admirable.

Want more? Go back to the Romantics, writing, painting and thinking in the aftermath of the American and French revolutions, so full of excitement for how the world might be changed they believed even Nature could be saved. Coleridge and a couple of his buddies actually planned to start a utopian commune they called a Pantisocracy on the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania, not far from where I grew up. Wordsworth may wonder, in his 30s, "whither has fled the visionary gleam?" But to wonder that, you need to have had a visionary gleam to start with. Read Blake, such a gifted writer and visual artist, words and images of incomparable intensity and beauty. Keep going all the way through John Keats and J.M.W. Turner, more words and images of incomparable intensity and beauty. Then, a generation later, on our side of the ocean, the Transcendentalists, Emerson through Dickinson on the poetry side, the Hudson River School, Thomas Cole through Albert Bierstadt on the painting side, words and images of incomparable intensity and beauty "made in America." This was a time when the sacred was still a "vital" (as in organically alive) force in the discourse, imaginations and, by implication, the natural world, of the great makers of the moment, before God was left for dead in the 20th century and then, in the 21st, turned into a cynical trope to leverage power in the political and economic marketplaces of late-stage capitalism.

Was it worth all the time I spent to immerse myself in those remote cultural moments, and many others besides, going all the way back to the dawn of Western history? Yes, times a million. First of all, I enjoyed every bit of it, as you might expect from someone with a scholarly bent. But more so because I learned so much, my personal jam, not just about "them," but also, through their eyes, something otherwise unknowable about "us," and, most importantly, about "me," what "I" could do and become in waters

that weren't especially amicable to what "he" most wanted to do and become. Every one of those fulcrum points gave me some leverage to pry "myself" up out of the muck of the moment every now and then, creating just enough space to stop telling myself "more garbage of this nature," the lies that get repeated so often by the mindless schools of tuna or barracuda plying these waters in search of prey that they begin to sound credible, and to start telling myself some actual "true things." Yes, times a million.

**August 14: In the Spirit … of "Let Nature be your teacher"**

For this, my penultimate Substack, I want to focus on teaching. My subtitle above is one of Wordsworth's more famous lines, from a poem I copy below, which became a banner of sorts for the Romantic enterprise in general. It's one I want, at least initially here, to turn around, to think about at my own "nature" (no capital n) *as* a teacher. As I said many times over the years, I did all the other stuff I was obligated to do professionally—write books and articles, direct programs, attend countless meetings and conferences, compose infinite numbers of memos—so they'd let me keep teaching, which in the economy of the system often seemed to be the least highly valued thing I did. This will be a symbolic homage to that work, the work I most loved doing, the work I was, I believe, called to do, the way I actually made a difference in at least a few human lives, including, importantly, my own.

. . .

I have a Romantic temperament and sensibility, was just born that way I'm now quite certain. I spent most of my life in a profoundly anti-Romantic historical ambience, philosophically, literarily, culturally, socially, professionally, all of it, which probably accounts for my felt sense of always being at odds, against the grain, out of step with "the times" in my personal, creative and professional worlds. And for much of the trouble I got myself into along the way. As I said last time, you don't get to choose when you're born. You just have to do your best where you happen to land.

Before I became a father, I presumed that children were born with somewhat malleable temperaments, not *tabula rasas* but receptive/vulnerable to shaping, for better or worse, by family, community and national values and standards. In other words that the "nurture" side of the nature-nurture equation was consequential. My

experience with both of my children persuaded me of exactly the opposite. Each of them it seemed to me came out, minute one, with a very distinct and fully formed temperament—a built-in foundational identity, a "nature"—the one they have to this day. The fact that I so quickly realized how wrong I was made me a better father—my call being to get to know them, love them, and not screw them up—and more tolerant in general.

It was also surprisingly therapeutic for me personally, one of those "moving to a different pool" experiences I talked about last time. I could suddenly see how and why I had so many difficulties in my own life, starting with my own father, who was, well, somewhat less tolerant of my built-in identity differences. Which then escalated into my ongoing problems with authority along the way. If you're like me, you know that whole story. If you're not, it would sound self-serving, maybe boring, so I won't tell it. All I'll say is that I crafted my own fatherhood in such a way that it both allowed me to get along extremely well with both of my kids, while they were growing up and now in their adulthood; and, surprisingly, to understand and to heal vicariously the various wounds that resulted from my ongoing sense of having been so oft-misunderstood, pressured to conform to standards, stereotypes and destinies for which I was (via my own inborn temperament and sensibility) entirely ill-suited. And which I most often resisted to my own detriment.

I'm saying this at the outset to account for the fact that I've written so often, here and elsewhere, about the Romantic poets, British and American—from William Blake on one side of the sea through Emily Dickinson on the other, a century of great poetry—the ones I fell in love with in my early teens, the ones I felt a spiritual kinship with throughout my life, the ones I often taught in entry-level courses to introduce recalcitrant poetry readers to the value of that genre. This is another piece of that sort, but more about teaching than poetics.

The Romantics were clearly enamored with what they called Nature, capital N. The word erupts all over the place, quite often as if it's meaning is a given. Whenever I taught those works I'd ask, somewhere along the way, what students thought that term meant, compared to what they meant when they used it. In other words, was their sense of the ongoing eco-conversation in our moment analogous to or different from the one these poets seemed to be preoccupied with a couple of centuries ago. Most students' initial instincts were, understandably, to assume that the word they were accustomed to hearing and using meant pretty much the same thing back then, at least in its generic "poetical" garb. So when they saw it they also, understandably, assumed they knew pretty much what to envision: woods, trees, birds, that sort of thing, a pleasant distraction from the stresses of "life." But when we started to look closely at the poems and other texts in play, it didn't take long to complicate those assumptions considerably.

In gen-ed courses especially—students there to fulfill requirements in disciplines other than their own, which in practical terms meant that most of them had little prior experience with or interest in poetry and poetics—one of my staple texts for getting into questions of this sort was the little book called *Lyrical Ballads* that William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge somehow got published, a small run, in 1798. That first edition appeared stealthily, without either of their names on the cover, title page, or anywhere. And the very brief "preface" Wordsworth composed was diffident, even defensive, focused on his assumption that many of the book's readers, "accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers . . . 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." So, a book of poems that even the authors believed would not be recognized as such published anonymously. I thought I was bad at PR!

At another historical moment, say a few decades earlier, that book's fate, if it could find a publisher at all, would likely have been instant oblivion. Same for its authors. That's not what

happened, though. The book somehow found enough traction to warrant a second edition, where you can see, in retrospect, Wordsworth's not-quite-invisible-hand engineering a transition from anonymity to celebrity in the authorial-creation business, his name now in big, bold print on the title page, just above an epigraph, in Latin, that translates to "How little this is to your taste, Pope!," a snide swipe at Alexander Pope, the "modern writer" whose "gaudiness and inane phraseology" was implied in the original preface; and Coleridge's primary contribution to the enterprise, his much criticized (at the time) "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," was moved from the first to the last item in the book. The speed and magnitude of this metamorphosis are stunning, Wordsworth front and center, writ large (literally), Coleridge lower case, his poems simply acknowledged in the preface.

And that preface—Wordsworth now emboldened to talk more confidently and expansively about all manner of things poetic—ballooned exponentially, diffidence merely a momentary pose to open his extravagant argument on behalf of his preferred approach to poetic composition, all that "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and "emotion recollected in tranquility" stuff that T.S. Eliot ends up vitiating 120 years later. Then a third and a fourth edition came in quick succession, that preface expanding a bit each time; until in less than a decade what Wordsworth initially assumed might not be recognized as poetry at all became pretty much the only thing that *was* recognized *as* poetry, and his manifesto became scriptural, what poetry would be and do for the next generation or two in England and throughout much of the 19th century in America. To this day, most inexperienced readers of poetry, like my students in those classes, when asked what a typical poem looks and sounds like, tend to think of something more like the Romantic template that little book of "experiments" established as the norm than anything Alexander Pope would prefer.

My entry point to our overall discussion of this book and what it represents was a comparative examination of the first and second version of that preface, as it moves from brief and tentative to sweeping and authoritative, a shift effected in just two years! How, I wonder aloud in class, and wonder still in my own head, was such a thing possible? A full treatment of that question would take pages here and generally took at least a full class period to cover. I bring it up here mostly to indicate that before we tackled Nature, we had already grappled with conundrums like how and why "authors" and "movements" get created culturally, who decides what poetry is and is not, and how, if at all, this particular project might apply for us now, facing our own nature-related issues.

As to Nature specifically: The two poems I used to focus our discussions were Wordsworth's "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned" (which replaced Coleridge's "Rime" as the opening items in the second edition, a telling shift, putting Nature at the apex rather than periphery of this project), a sequence of conversations between "William" (the dreamy Romantic) and "Matthew" (the pragmatic contrarian), the former poem Matthew's critique of William's apparent lack of ambition followed by William's initial defense. The latter poem is all William, critiquing Matthew's bookishness and proffering Nature as a better curriculum. Here are those two poems:

**Expostulation and Reply**

*Why, William, on that old gray stone,*
*Thus for the length of half a day,*
*Why, William, sit you thus alone,*
*And dream your time away?*

*"Where are your books? — that light bequeathed*
*To Beings else forlorn and blind!*
*Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed*
*From dead men to their kind.*

*"You look round on your Mother Earth,*
*As if she for no purpose bore you;*
*As if you were her first-born birth,*
*And none had lived before you!"*

*One morning thus, by Esthwaite lake,*
*When life was sweet, I knew not why,*
*To me my good friend Matthew spake,*
*And thus I made reply:—*

*"The eye — it cannot choose but see;*
*We cannot bid the ear be still;*
*Our bodies feel, where'er they be,*
*Against or with our will.*

*"Nor less I deem that there are Powers*
*Which of themselves our minds impress;*
*That we can feed this mind of ours*
*In a wise passiveness.*

*"Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum*
*Of things forever speaking,*
*That nothing of itself will come*
*But we must still be seeking?*

*"Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,*
*Conversing as I may,*
*I sit upon this old gray stone,*
*And dream my time away.*

## The Tables Turned

*Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;*
*Or surely you'll grow double:*
*Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;*
*Why all this toil and trouble?*

*The sun above the mountain's head,*
*A freshening lustre mellow*
*Through all the long green fields has spread,*
*His first sweet evening yellow.*

*Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:*
*Come, hear the woodland linnet,*
*How sweet his music! on my life,*
*There's more of wisdom in it.*

*And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!*
*He, too, is no mean preacher:*
*Come forth into the light of things,*
*Let Nature be your teacher.*

*She has a world of ready wealth,*
*Our minds and hearts to bless—*
*Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,*
*Truth breathed by cheerfulness.*

*One impulse from a vernal wood*
*May teach you more of man,*
*Of moral evil and of good,*
*Than all the sages can.*

*Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;*
*Our meddling intellect*
*Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—*
*We murder to dissect.*

*Enough of Science and of Art;*
*Close up those barren leaves;*
*Come forth, and bring with you a heart*
*That watches and receives.*

One of the first things students noticed, being students pursuing a college degree, is the main contrast to Nature: books! HUH? What is that all about anyway? Not industrialization, urbanization, pollution, but *books*? We live in a book-reverent culture, especially in the academy, so to argue that books are worse than Nature as teachers, even "dull and endless strife," seems almost sacrilegious. We might talk for a while about the primary reasons *they* use to justify "quit[ing] their books," a common occurrence for most over-booked students. As you might expect, their preferred alternatives were not generally to go out and listen to a "linnet" or a "blithe . . . throstle."

This invited us to at least playfully consider what "education" would be like if a teacher said to go out and sit "alone" on "an old gray stone" for "half a day" instead of assigning a book to read. What would you actually do to use your sitting-alone-on-a-stone time to learn something, a line of thinking that often entailed trying to fathom what "William" means by "a wise passiveness," as opposed to, say, a dumb passiveness? And how could you tell the difference between the two while you're sitting there? Or the difference between "seeking" and being receptive to some wordless "speaking?" Or how terms like "ready wealth," "wisdom," "heath," and "cheerfulness" could be said to apply to "the beauteous forms of things" William is enamored of? Would your takeaway from your stone-time be anything like what Wordsworth thinks Nature has to teach, or something you figure out on your own, or just some guess about what you think your teacher wants you to learn? What would you pay for a course of that sort? What would grading be like in that educational economy? It's just an interesting line of inquiry, one that students seemed to enjoy exploring from their many and various, often conflicting, points of view.

It would also, of course, give us a chance to look critically at the educational matrix they (and I) were enmeshed in—books the primary currency—from that extrinsic value system. I'd usually conclude that portion of the discussion by asking: What do you

make of the fact that Wordsworth includes this anti-book poem in a *book*? Is that something you think *he* thinks is a contradiction? Or would he exempt *his* book from that critique? And finally, do you think he would (or I should) approve if you went out and sat on a stone for a while instead of reading this book that implores you to do that instead of reading books? All of this would provide at least some baseline sense of what Nature meant for Wordsworth, the scion of British Romanticism, and how different it was from our own instinctive sense of the term.

The next step in trying to fathom what Nature is at any specific cultural moment is to suss out what it is not, a somewhat more difficult process. The Romantics came onto the scene at a vexatious historical moment, around the turn of the 19th century, both cognizant of and ambivalent about the Enlightenment project that had come to its most fulsome fruition in their time, the seeds for which were planted as much as half a millennium prior, with the advent of a very specific kind of humanism, one founded on the recovery of Greco-Roman cultural artifacts and ideals. The Quattrocento artists, a few of whom I briefly mentioned in my Swinburne post, were followed in quick succession by the great masters of the "high" Renaissance, ensconcing a more and more fulsomely fleshy human figure at the center of their creations, and, by implication, the universe. Many students would have at least a fragmentary sense of these benchmarks. Some of them would also be cognizant of the concomitant scientific revolution, starting, say, with Bacon and Galileo in the 16th century and culminating with Newton and Leibniz in the 18th, which not only kept humans plumb at the center of the universe but accorded them a position of privilege in relation to Nature, essentially an idealized "observational platform" authorized to measure and control the world they oversaw. Some might even be informed about economic matters, the rise of industrialism and capitalism. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, for example, was published a couple of decades before this little book. Maybe a few would be familiar with the philosophers I've been indexing along the way in my posts, like Rousseau and Kant say,

who were relative contemporaries of, and particularly impactful for, these poets. In other words, all of that "Enlightenment" baggage I've been arguing with in these posts. We'd spend some time trying to arrange a few of these puzzle pieces into a coherent pattern, one that could facilitate a paradigmatic understanding of the backdrop against which Nature gradually emerged as a concept not just of physical but of moral consequence during that extended interim.

For some reason, the proverb "physician heal thyself" just came to mind for me, I'm not quite sure why. Its meaning is both enigmatic and easily intuited. It became fully ensconced in our tradition in Luke 4:23-4 when Jesus uses it as a cudgel to get his hometown folks to back off their expectations for special treatment, as if he's some "local boy made good" who now owes *them* something:

> *Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'"*
>
> *"Truly I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown."*

True 'dat, Jesus!

Which now calls to mind another moment, deep into Matthew's version of "The Sermon on the Mount" (7:3-5), when Jesus, drawing on his carpenter heritage, warns about the sense of unjustified entitlement that subtends judgmentalness, a form of hypocrisy especially offensive to him:

> *Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of*

*your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.*

My takeaways from this unexpected turn, right now, seven years removed from my career as a teacher (so why should anyone care what I used to do?) are tentatively twofold. The obvious one is that if I want to change anything out there in the world, like the untoward upward trajectory of global warming, I need to change myself first. Okay, I get that. My contribution is, of course, minimal, but it's not nothing. The more surprising one, though, is what feels like an invitation to rewrite that old proverb as "professor teach thyself," the meaning of which is similarly enigmatic but more difficult for me to intuit right now. So I'll do what I usually do at such an impasse: start to write and see where it leads me.

When I began my doctoral work back in the early 70s, one conventional binary for conceptualizing what you wanted to be or become professionally was specialist vs. generalist. In the first case you would choose a narrow focus for study and "drill down" deeply into it, become an "expert," an "authority," all in the context of an established body of previous work. I'll call this the "research" model. In the second case, you would envision a broad area of concern or set of questions and then seek to "map out" its territory and boundaries on your own terms. I'll call this the "scholarship" model. Those who followed the research model often derogated those who followed the scholarship model with terms like dilettante, shallow, superficial, even amateur. I didn't choose that latter path the day I started graduate school. I chose it the day I was born. It's just my "nature," how my head works, that "temperament and sensibility" I opened with, always casting a wide net, looking for patterns, assembling disconnected pieces into coherent, organic networks, in a word, Romantic.

My daughter shares this gift, and she uses a discourse to define it that I find quite helpful: She is, she says, a "systems-level thinker." Most of her colleagues, in her discourse, are "siloed" in their professional or organizational roles. She is extraordinarily skilled

at understanding how these arrays of siloes might work better together than they do apart, the "natural" state of affairs in a culture like ours that venerates hierarchy and pyramidal authority structures. I didn't have that discourse at the time, but that's how I imagined, planned, and executed my scholarly career instinctively. It's what made me and my work not just original, but unique.

Later in my career the term inter-disciplinary entered the argot of the academy, a somewhat more generous description for someone who thinks like me. But most often to do that kind of work you had to find an agreeable colleague in another discipline to collaborate with you, each of you still with one foot firmly planted in your own. In my book *Writing/Teaching: Essays Toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy* (2001) I make the case that the "inter" in that term should refer not to the bipolarity of two "fields" overlapping a bit, but to the largely uncolonized spaces *between* them, the non-fields left fallow because no one ever noticed they were even there. We don't see them because of the way our professional culture has pre-named the disciplines, the specialisms, that have legitimacy, a template Aristotle established over two millennia ago, to give a sense of how antique it is.

It was in those "inter-fields" that I ended up doing most of my cultivation. I enjoyed that work immensely. To do it well, in the classroom or out, as a professor or just a human being, which is all I am now, you need to do some work on the plank in your own eye. I have been working on that plank-removal project for a lifetime, especially so during my retirement years, which have sent me spinning on this journey through all of the arcane "inter-field" stuff I've been writing about here, trying mightily to teach myself how to be more "human being," less "professor," maybe tone down my preachy mode, an occupational hazard for someone in my (former) business.

I guess I'd say now, whatever you think about Nature (capital N), let *your* nature (small n), the one you were born with, be your teacher, both in and out of whatever your "classroom" happens to be;

and don't let anyone, including some "nurtured" version of yourself, reverse that equation. (S)he is always the one, sometimes the only one, who will tell you the truth. I believe, for the most part, I listened to that voice, as a professor and as a human being. And I have my contrarian Romantic "nature" to thank for maintaining my "temporary inconvenience for permanent improvement" attitude along the way. One of these days, if I live long enough, I hope I'll be able to take down the "under construction" signs and fly down the highway at the speed I would have preferred all my life: just me being me, fast and free.

**August 18: In the Spirit … of indolence**

I spend a lot of time wandering around here in Olympia, in town, in the forests, everywhere. Today, for some reason, I thought of this passage from Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner:"

*Since then, at an uncertain hour,*
*That agony returns:*
*And till my ghastly tale is told,*
*This heart within me burns.*

*I pass, like night, from land to land;*
*I have strange power of speech;*
*That moment that his face I see,*
*I know the man that must hear me:*
*To him my tale I teach.*

I have felt a kinship with Coleridge's mariner ever since I first read this great poem about 60 years ago, my sharing his bi-polar on/off switch in my intellectual and emotional life, bursts of intense activity and production that feel involuntary to me, more a matter of obsession, even possession, than planned projects, followed by fallow periods, a cycle of work and recovery that, in the end, keeps me balanced and happy. Coleridge once characterized himself in a letter to a friend as "indolence capable of energies." That's a much less dramatic way of saying pretty much the same thing. Ever since my wife Carol died a decade ago my creative cycle has been surprisingly rhythmic, three months on, three months off, rinse and repeat, the products of which are the two books a year I've been writing like shift-work. What toggles the switch "on" is usually very small, a sentence I read, an image I see, a passing thought on one of my walks, that somehow beckons me to start writing. I never have a clear sense of why I'm writing or what it's for until it's done, three months later, as if I picked up a loose thread of yarn, started knitting without any plan, and end up with a sweater, or a throw, or

a pair of mittens, which might be trim or baggy or mismatched, one color, many colors, whatever. When the whole of the thing is there in front of me, I suddenly see it as what it is, what it wanted to become, what it wanted me to make of it, the switch toggles off, and I enter into a "nothing" state of mind that I experience as a very pleasant "something," kind of like the quantum vacuum I wrote about a few times ago, what I am now (following Coleridge) calling "indolence."

My "energies" episodes are rarely as dramatic as the mariner's; my strange power is less of speech than typing, in that the words seem to flow off my fingertips, of their own accord; and "the man" who "must hear me" is primarily me. As I've said many times along my way, I write through these interludes to teach myself something I could never otherwise come to know. I do hope, in my heart, that someone else out there might overhear all of these goings-on and learn something, too, which is why I make my work public for free. More often than not that hope is fulfilled.

I opened my Substack page in May without any forethought or fanfare, just because I felt like it. I figured it would just meander on interminably. Pretty soon I was writing two or more posts a week, trying to resist the temptation to just pile them on top of one another. This is number 21 in the series, and I'm posting it a few days short of three months after that seagull careening in the sky over Budd Bay reminded me of Gerard Manley Hopkins' great poem about:

> *daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding*
> *Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding*
> *High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing*
> *In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing.,*

I have no more essays in my queue and no ideas for new ones. So I assume I'm done with this "on" cycle, am now "off, off forth on swing." I started with that dazzling, dizzying windhover, spent time

in the dark, conjured angels of the morning, conversed with Jesus, Laozi, and the Buddha, then Schrödinger, Einstein, and Newton, watched a bluejay test his branch, revisited three magical trees, came to terms with some difficult "lives" in my past, savored time ambling toward me like a good friend, and remembered more poets and poems than I can re-remember right now. I enjoyed this summer immensely, the "weather" in my head as persistently pleasant as the weather in Olympia has been, sunny and mild, day after day, the huge dome of blue sky hosting endless arrays of shape-shifting cumulus clouds, ideal for walking, thinking and writing. There were things I had to settle in there, and they're settled. Now my head is empty, pleasantly buzzy, blank. And I expect it will be for a while, just me walking in the places I love to walk listening to the "birds and the bees and the flowers and the trees" (remember that bouncy little Jewel Akens tune from 1965?), singing and playing my guitar, writing an occasional "tiny poem" for my Instagram, the music that turns my interludes of indolence into healing retreats, rebreathing life into my spirit. Coincidentally (or not) I have the exact amount of material I need to make a new book, the one you're reading now, (either the free PDF on my website or the at-cost paperback from Amazon, its amazing cover courtesy of one of my son's paintings, worth it just for that.)

Maybe what comes next will be different. Maybe not. Maybe it will be nothing. I'll just have to wait and see. I'm deeply grateful for every single "view" of my pieces. I know there are at least a few among you who enjoyed what I have to offer because you told me via your "likes" and "comments." I hope there are at least a few more who think that more quietly. The whole thing, now that I'm thinking about it, is kind of like teaching. You look out over that sea of faces—my classes were typically just about the size of my pool of subscribers here—and know pretty quickly that at least a few of those present are really enjoying their time there because they express their enthusiasm; after a while you notice there are at least a few more like that who just prefer to experience their enjoyment more reservedly; and you keep doing

your best hoping the rest of those less expressive faces will get something of value from the time they're spending in your company. And forgive you for your excesses in trying to achieve that effect.

The mariner's involuntary "student" is a carefree young fellow on his way to a wedding, just looking to have a good time. Instead, the mariner mesmerizes him with his "glittering eye," and he has to endure his horror story. In the end, having missed the whole wedding:

> *He went like one that hath been stunned,*
> *And is of sense forlorn:*
> *A sadder and a wiser man,*
> *He rose the morrow morn.*

Whether or not my excesses here made you wiser, I at least hope they have not made you sadder.

If I had to boil all of this dither down to a simple message, I think the mariner offers a pretty good template to start with:

> *Farewell, farewell! but this I tell*
> *To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!*
> *He prayeth well, who loveth well*
> *Both man and bird and beast.*
>
> *He prayeth best, who loveth best*
> *All things both great and small;*
> *For the dear God who loveth us,*
> *He made and loveth all.*

Your concept of prayer, or love, or what's godly may not be anything like his, or mine for that matter, but my hope is those terms are not entirely alien to your personal lexicon. Many critics have savaged Coleridge for concluding his great poem with such a bland cliché, as if it's him speaking here. It's not. It's the mariner, an unschooled deckhand whose dire journey into the

Southern Ocean and back has seared him to the bone. Clichés always take on their significance in the context of the experiences of those who proffer them. It can be as light-hearted as Bill and Ted's "Be excellent to each other" after their grand tour of world history, or as sober as the mariner's, whose journey through his hellish nightmare started with his thoughtless killing of an albatross and ends here with this invocation to love not just birds but all things great and small. Read the whole poem and that ending will resonate with truth and goodness. Not cliché but wisdom.

The last half of the 20th century and the first quarter of this one, my lifespan, has in my opinion been a period of spiritual insolvency. The current moment, the worst, is not an aberration. It is the inevitable terminus of a long slide, the result of which is that a majority of the electorate, afflicted by irrational grievances, has ceded control to "leaders" it believes will protect their interests, or at least salve their imagined wounds, at the expense of "others" they fear or hate. A society like that, like ours, held hypnotically in the sway of a cult, doesn't just tolerate ethical bankruptcy, it celebrates it, graft and grift not abhorrent but aspirational.

It's tempting to blame the person at the tippy-top of the Ponzi-scheme, the frontman for all this chaos and corruption. Or the representatives on both sides of the aisle, whose impotence (either by deference or debility) allows his agenda to flourish. Or the Supreme Court, who make the awful lawful on his behalf. Or those many minions just following his (executive) orders so they won't get fired, too. Or the media mouthpieces who crave audience adulation so badly they will grovel to garner it. But they, all of them, in my view, are merely empty-headed vessels whose vacuity of vision and values leaves them suffering the very fate they are warning us to avoid.

"A foolish consistency," as Emerson says, may be "the hobgoblin of little minds." But the mindless consistency of the hordes of hobgoblins running the show right now is not just foolish, it is ghoulish, heinous, inhumane. The swarms of smarmy glad-handers and talking heads, whose professions attract and reward those without inner resources or a moral compass, will inevitably take direction from the monied power-brokers to whom they are beholden, the ones who always have an agenda prepared ahead of time. In our case, right now, it is the robber barons ensconced in penthouses on the top floors of capitalist skyscrapers. They are the ones who crafted project 2025, the script all their puppets, including the big orange one, are reciting their lines from. They are the ones literally writing the legislation our representatives are rubber-stamping. They are the ones ventriloquizing their self-serving talking points through every channel they now own in the media marketplace. The only real defense against slumlords of this sort is not to let your own head become so vacant—with rage or fear or despair, say—that their sleazy lies can take out long-term leases and set up housekeeping there. That's my primary work these days, keeping my head alive, free, all mine, and on a good path, a meager contribution, admittedly, to the common good, but not negligible, at least if you believe, as I do, there is an intrinsic connection between personal consciousness and the universe. When I run into a passerby who facilitates that work, I take heed.

Like Coleridge's mariner, say, a simple soul with a simple message:

*He prayeth best, who loveth best*
*All things both great and small;*

Not a bad place to start. Or end. I hope these posts have inclined you to love something great or small, maybe an (un)familiar poet or poem, a favorite wisdom text, a morning angel, an electron pair entangled, a tree you meet on a walk, a bird in flight or testing a

branch, a fish trying its best to see the water, maybe yourself, even better. Perhaps we'll meet again somewhere out there in the blogosphere the next time my switch toggles on, "this heart within me burns," and I find myself once again "in the spirit."

**October 17: A belated straggler for NO KINGS #2:**

**I was hoping to extend my "indolence" a few more weeks, get my full three months "off" (and maybe I will after I post this), but sometimes history intrudes on autobiography. What flipped my switch "on" is tomorrow's NO KINGS protests. As is the case with my first NO KINGS post (June 15), I open with a bit of the current political theater, turn to a personal story, and then offer a critique of the faux-Christian veneer that is used to gussy up pretty much any awful thing the political right sets its mind to these days.**

…

Chicago is poised to be invaded by the Texas National Guard (pending litigation). I was going to put invaded inside quotation marks but I decided against it. I would have done that if the troops were coming from Illinois, Michigan or Wisconsin, say. The choice of the Texas Guard was not accidental. It is symbolic. I have said for years that we are in the midst of a slow-motion civil war in this country, one that is dissolving the foundational framework of the American experiment from the inside out in home-brewed vitriol. This move seems to me to be expressly designed to accelerate the "motion" of that war considerably. MAGA minions and their leader—who, given his scarily impaired physical and mental health is less like a spearhead for their movement and more like the proverbial blunt instrument they can wield to pummel their "enemies" into submission—seem to be hankering for a cultural reset not just back to what Robert Lowell called "the tranquilized Fifties," McCarthyism and the Cold War manosphere all the rage, but to the Gilded Age, rife with robber barons and Jim Crow, wealth and white privilege on steroids, this time with billionaire tech-bros overlording legions of "wage slaves" to keep their yachts afloat. That's what I believe they

actually mean by making America great again, even if (or maybe especially if) it takes dismantling the Federal government to get there. Renaming Army bases for Confederate generals is one thing. Gerrymandering Red State voting districts to disempower Black voters is orders of magnitude more damaging. Using federal troops to randomly round up Black and Brown bodies for deportation (as ICE is doing right now, often quite violently), whether they have violated laws or not, is even more egregious. There are MAGA leaders calling expressly now for a national "divorce." Sending military personnel from Texas to Illinois—because they can—is a good step in that direction. In his testimony before Congress, retired Army Major General William Enyart warned that we are "one trigger pull away from another [Kent State-type] tragedy." I was around back then. If you think that's a good look, you have lost your way. He said it took a generation for the National Guard to redeem its public image. He was wrong. That image has never been redeemed and never will be, one of the reasons I believe the current deployments will end just as badly. Which gets me to the main theme I want to explore today: killing.

For a recent family Zoom we were asked to talk about the primary "work" of our retirement. Among other things, I said I aspired to "keep a peaceful heart," no mean task in the toxic haze of chaos, hatred and fear that saturates the current zeitgeist in America. My main strategy for doing that, I explained, was a very basic "anger management" program I started about 70 years ago, in an after-school Catholic catechism class, specifically on the day we were being instructed on how to "examine our consciences" in preparation for our first communion. The nun in charge basically led us through the 10 commandments (the Catholic version), with guidance about how to interpret and apply each of them at our relatively "innocent" level. I remember absolutely nothing of what she said pertinent to the first 4. When she got to number 5, which back then was translated as "Thou shalt not kill" (more about this translation later) I breathed a sigh of relief. I was pretty

sure I hadn't killed anyone so could skip this one. Not so fast, Paul! She went on to document a variety of more normal human experiences and states of mind that were at least preparatory for, and in some respects analogous to, killing. One of them was anger. I was stunned. I was as intense when I was 7 as I am now, so I was quite often angry. It didn't take me long to put two and two together to see how anger, if held close for a long time, leads to hatred; and how hatred, if held close for a long time, leads to violence; and how violence, when it is founded in an entrenched sense of "righteousness" leads inevitably to killing. I say inevitably because even if, by some gift of good fortune, it doesn't end with bodies in the streets, it will kill the spirits of those it seeks to dominate and oppress. And, as consequentially, it will kill the spirit of the one who never resolved that anger in the first place. This was a most sobering insight.

So, anger became the top item on my first-confessional inventory and stayed there pretty much forever after that. I haven't been to confession in decades, but if I went today it would still be number one on my list. I can hear you saying: What good is all that work, then? You've gotten nowhere, still taking a step down the path toward killing pretty much every day. Yes, that's true. But I have known for 70 years now how important it is not to take the second step, and I have also learned in the meantime how to reverse that first step. My wife Carol knew all of this, too, and worked hard to heal herself from that inclination. Toward that end, she pinned up on our kitchen wall this famous expression: "Holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person do die," a bit of wisdom attributed variously, most often to the Buddha. Note that it doesn't say feeling anger or even expressing it. Anger is a foundational and useful human emotion. Look at how Jesus casts the money changers out of the Temple. He doesn't say "Hey, guys, would you please tone it down a bit?" He literally demolishes their stands and throws them and their animals out into the streets. With prejudice, as they say in legal circles. The

quote says “holding on” so I work hard on “letting go.” And when I do, I recover a peaceful heart.

The next quantum leap I made in my anger-management program was 50 years ago, watching “The Ascent of Man” series on PBS narrated by Jacob Bronowski. In the last episode (if my memory serves), about the 20th century, horrifically violent, killing on an unimaginable scale, he concluded by saying that the antidote to this evil was an ethic founded on “tolerance.” I was taken aback: How could something so vague and mild-sounding counter these torrents of death and destruction? To explain, he turned, surprisingly, to Heisenberg’s “uncertainly principle” from quantum mechanics, which basically says that at the foundational level of our universe you can never know with absolute certainty what something is or is doing without becoming absolutely ignorant about its complementary facet. Bronowski proposed renaming it “the principle of tolerance” and extending it to all human affairs. Then he showed a montage of images from Auschwitz. He didn’t lay out all the steps connecting his concept with those stunning images. The logic of their juxtaposition was impeccable and convincing. The presumption of absolute certainty *always* leads to killing, whether it’s a holocaust in Europe in the 1940s, genocide in Palestine in the 2020s, or a civil war in the streets of Chicago next week or next month. And yes, the antidote is still tolerance. What Heisenberg insinuated into the mechanics of our universe was a degree of non-negotiable “give” in every tiny bit of stuff out there, like adding a little Lycra to denim so it is “forgiving,” both concepts that also have potentially significant ethical implications. These three values—giving, forgiveness, tolerance—mimic pretty closely the ones the thunder announces in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, which T.S. Eliot indexes in “The Waste Land:” giving, compassion, and self-control. That’s how ancient and deep their roots are in human civilization. And if you extrapolate them into everyday affairs, you will do far less killing, if any at all. (If you’re new to my page, I offer a detailed program for translating the principles of

quantum mechanics into a practical personal ethic: posts dated June 19, June 30, July 16 and July 26.)

So how might this apply to what's happening right now? I'll start with a little dustup Pope Leo created in a recent interview. The new pope has been a thorn in the side of Donald Trump and the many MAGA Catholics he has recruited into his administration. Their most recent irritation derives from a comment he made about what it means to be "pro-life:"

> *Someone who says, "I am against abortion but I am in favour of the death penalty" is not really pro-life. Someone who says, "I am against abortion but I am in agreement with the inhuman treatment of immigrants in the United States," I do not know if that is pro-life.*

Here, he calls out the hypocrisy of Christians who vehemently oppose abortion (sometimes by actually killing those who seek or perform them, though Leo is too nice a guy to go there, and I'm not) yet not only endorse but cheer on capital punishment and the inhuman treatment of immigrants. And will do likewise, I'm sure, if the Texas National Guard guns down any "radical leftists" or forcibly detains and deports "criminal" immigrants of color in "war torn" Chicago, both of which, according to my calculus above, are forms of killing, literally or spiritually. The blowback from "good" MAGA Christians, including some clerics in the Church hierarchy, was immediate and harsh, all of them basically saying it's an apples/oranges type thing, that lots of kinds of killing are both justifiable and good. Here, for example, is a link to one of those arguments, an article called "Pope Leo Got It Wrong," published in the October 8th issue of *The Catholic Herald,* which differentiates between these two kinds of killing in stereotypically Christian ways:

*https://thecatholicherald.com/article/pope-leo-got-it-wrong-catholicism-permits-the-death-penalty*.

As is almost always the case in matters of this sort, the primary supporting doctrinal warrants are drawn from Paul (quoted directly), whose version of Christianity is so different from Jesus' that they simply can't be reconciled, especially on matters of this sort. The only warrant for vengeance- or justice-killing the author attributes to Jesus is a summarization, rather than a direct quote, of a passage from Matthew 18:

> *And the Saviour's own language can be stark; when He says of one who causes a little one to sin that it would be better to have a millstone hanged about his neck and be drowned (Matthew 18:6), He is not indulging cruelty but insisting upon the gravity of certain offences.*

There's a good reason this passage was summarized rather than quoted. Like almost all such attempts by Christians to justify killing with a blessing from Jesus, this one depends on very careful cherry-picking. Here is the actual Biblical text, with some of its preliminary context:

> *At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"*
>
> *He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to*

*the person through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell."*

Jesus is not talking solely, or even specifically, about the corruption of actual children. The phrase "little ones," heavily freighted in this article, actually applies to Jesus' true followers, "those who believe in me." Jesus calls the child forth as a model for the *adults* present, to become "like." To "change" *themselves*. He offers a very specific regimen for making that transition in both the synoptic and lost gospels. Takes a lot of work for an adult to get there. Jesus has done that work, so he knows. The point he's making here to the adults present is to get on with that work so they will be welcoming not only to actual children (which I'm sure he believes goes without saying) but especially to all those who have become "like" children, including Jesus himself, thereby qualifying them for "the kingdom of heaven." If you don't do that, punishment is warranted, but most of the methods Jesus catalogs are self-inflicted amputations to prevent a repeat of your own offenses, not some State- or Church-enforced execution.

And that's just for openers. If you read further, you find almost immediately Jesus' famous exchange with Peter about forgiveness:

*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"*

> *Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.* (Some translations say "seven times seventy.")

The theme of this chapter, for anyone willing to take the time to read it all, is forgiveness not vengeance, the preservation of life not killing. It closes with a long parable about debt-forgiveness, the debtor who, having had his debt forgiven, then refuses to do likewise for those in his debt. This is exactly, I mean exactly, the mode of hypocrisy that Pope Leo seems to me to be calling out. The parable concludes this way:

> *"Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.*
>
> *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

It is for a failure of forgiveness—not just in a formulaic way but "from your heart"—that the "heavenly Father" (NOT the State or the Church "fathers") metes out punishment. Jesus often says that his parables will make sense only for those with "ears to hear," and he seems pretty sure most of his listeners most of the time, including often his own apostles, don't have them. A good first step for tuning your ears to hear what Jesus is getting at is to actually read all of what he says, not cherry-pick the one little thing your own ears prefer to hear for your own selfish reasons and then turn it into words that are yours not his. That's what Paul did with Jesus' words, which is why their visions are so incontrovertibly at odds with one another. The *Catholic Herald* is a conservative voice in Christian conversations and Niwa Limbu,

the article's author, is a regular contributor on a wide range of issues. The ears they hear with are clearly not mine. Or, last week, Pope Leo's. I'm going with Leo on this one.

Let me be clear, I am by no means an apologist for Catholic Popes. I have read at least a bit of history about every single Pope's reign since Peter. You would be hard pressed to find a resume of leadership more prone to greed, nepotism, infighting, power-mongering, and, in keeping with my theme here, killing, often on an industrial scale, than this one. If you don't believe me, look into the traumatic and trenchant formation of the Roman (i.e, imperial) Catholic (i.e., universal) Church in the fourth and fifth centuries, the long "war"—with lots of excommunications, book-burnings, and, yes, killing—between Augustinian and Pelagian versions of the faith, as many diverse Christian communities and canons were collapsed into an orthodoxy based on Augustine's reading of Paul (who had a lot of experience with killing) not Pelagius' reading of Jesus (who didn't.) Or look into the Medieval Inquisition that exterminated the Cathars in the 12th and 13th centuries, tens of thousands of people killed because their notion of goodness wasn't properly orthodox. Or the Spanish Inquisition in the 15th and 16th centuries targeting, among others, Jews whose conversion to Catholicism was deemed, well, both not quite and too "kosher." And that's just for starters. Pick pretty much any "heresy" you can think of, and you'll find a lot of Church-sanctioned killing designed expressly to excise it. Sometimes I think how fortunate Jesus was to raise himself from the dead so he wouldn't have to wear himself to the bone rolling over in his grave.

So, what makes all of this killing not only something you don't have to "confess" but something to be proud of? That gets me to that matter of translation I mentioned above. The "alternative facts" version of the 5th commandment is based on a translation of the key term not as "kill" but "murder." That is, in fact, a more accurate translation of the original text (the 6th commandment in

Exodus 20.) Western culture has for millennia designated many, many different kinds of state-sanctioned killing as not-murder, and in the context of law and custom they are all quite easy to justify, even praise. Just like capital punishment. “The Father” (the one Jesus is proffering as an alternative to the Old Testament God who seemed quite comfortable with killing) has nothing to do with it. Nor, more crucially, does the son, if you bother to read what he actually said.

Donald Trump has taken lately to saying that he wants to go to heaven. One of the nice things about Jesus’ message is it’s never too late to save your soul. Even the vineyard workers who arrive just before the shift ends get credit for a full day’s work. But you actually have to show up and pick a few grapes to qualify. A military invasion of one of your own cities to relitigate a Civil War whose primary purpose was to restore to full humanhood all the Black or Brown bodies who could be righteously “owned” and, if need be, tortured and killed with God’s blessing, is morally heinous. One of its intended effects is to turn the descendants of those Black or Brown bodies back into chattel you can chain up, throw in a cage, and dump anywhere in the world you want, preferably someplace that will mistreat, imprison and, yes, even kill them. All without ever having to examine your conscience even once to acknowledge the anger-infused hatred that leavens your project. What a sweet deal. My advice to Donald Trump: How about reading Matthew 18, not to justify building a made-in-America millstone factory so you always have enough supplies on hand to drown anyone who crosses you, but to become like a child, humble, merciful, forgiving, at least once before the shift-ending whistle blows.

And, by the way, if you covet a Nobel Peace Prize, invading your own cities, against their wishes, for no reason except you want revenge on your enemies, is not necessarily the best look. Want to bring peace to the streets of Chicago, or anywhere else? Start with your own heart.

Paul is the author of numerous books available (in paperback at cost of production) on Amazon.com and (for free in PDF form) at paulkameen.com

**Poetry:**

*the other side of the light (2024)*
*slights: my new tiny poems from here not there* (2021)
*September Threnody (2021)*
*In the Dark* (2016)
*Harvest Moon* (2016)
*Li Po-ems* (2016)
*Mornings After: Poems 1975-95 (extended 2025)*
*Beginning Was* (1980)

**Personal Essays:**

*Willing Spirit (2025)*
*Reading/Writing Outside the Lines (2024*
*The New Not-Normal (2024)*
*Writing Myself In (2024)*
*In Dreams . . .* (2022)
*Living Hidden* (2021)
*Harvest* (2020)
*Spring Forward* (2019)
*The Imagination* (2019)
*A Mind of Winter* (2019)
*First, Summer* (2018)
*Last Spring* (2018)
*This Fall* (2016)

**Scholarship:**

*Re-reading Poets: The Life of the Author* (2011)
*Writing/Teaching: Essays toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy* (2001)